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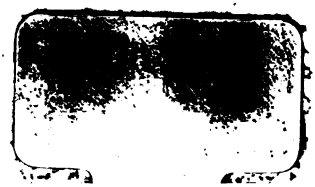

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MONCRIEFFE'S SECOND WIFE.

A NOVEL.

BY

LOLO,

AUTHOR OF "WOOING A SWEETBRIAR," "A CRUEL SECRET," "WAS HERS THE FAULT?" ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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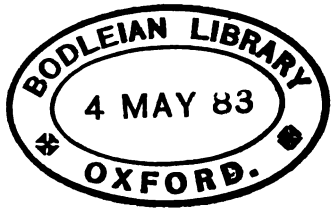

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MONCRIEFFE'S SECOND WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

RENDING OF THE VEIL.

IT was the last day of August. Pearl had left Moncrieffe Castle ten days ago, and to-day Sir Eldred was to leave too. He had been here a whole month now. Long ago he had suggested leaving, but Moncrieffe had insisted on his remaining to the end of the month. Moncrieffe had been slow to perceive that all was over between Harry and his cousin, and when Sir Eldred made his suggestion about leaving the castle, Moncrieffe had not thoroughly realised the fact. He saw that Harry flirted with everyone save Eldred, and he fancied

that the latter was inclined to leave the castle from pique, and had pressed him to remain.

The young man had not required much pressing; but it was only a few days after this that Bruce became convinced that his cousin did not care for Harry. But neither did Harry seem to care for him, and so Moncrieffe could not be seriously vexed with his cousin. The flirting had always been on Harry's side, and now she seemed tired of flirting with Sir Eldred, and had turned her attentions to other men. Under such circumstances Moncrieffe might be secretly annoyed, but he could find no just cause of anger with his cousin.

But at last the day of Sir Eldred's departure had come, and his host no longer pressed him to remain.

It was the afternoon, and Constance was sitting in her boudoir, alone. Sir Eldred was now the only guest in the castle; Sir Charles and Lady de Vere had remained but a few days, and the other guests had kept shifting and changing, and yesterday the last, save Sir Eldred, had left. Yesterday, too, Harry and Julia had gone to spend a week with Sir Charles and Lady de Vere at their house, Dinachny, and so Constance found herself alone on this afternoon, for Bruce was out, and Sir Eldred had walked over to Dunfern

Cottage to say good-bye to Pearl—for she had been out when he made his farewell to her mother yesterday, and he did not like to go without seeing her again. He had only seen her twice since she left the castle, and on both of these occasions she had struck him as looking pale and unwell, and as he had grown extremely fond of her, in a brotherly sort of way, he had taken the trouble of going again to Dunfern Cottage for the sake of bidding her good-bye.

Constance was glad when she saw him set out after luncheon; he was to leave about five o'clock, and it would have been uncomfortable having him hanging about the drawing-room all the afternoon. It gives one such an unsettled feeling when someone is hanging about, waiting for the hour of their departure to arrive, and unable to settle quietly to anything. So Constance was glad when Sir Eldred informed her that he was going over to see her sister.

"I shall be back in good time," he said; and she had replied indifferently that he would have abundance of time, and then went up to her boudoir, and sat there with her hands on her lap for the rest of the afternoon. A dreadful weight seemed to oppress her, and deprive her of the power of doing anything. She tried to work, but this made her head

ache; and then she took up a book, but soon it dropped from her cold fingers, and she sat thinking, yet trying not to think. What was it that ailed her? what was the meaning of this agony which was creeping over her? Ever since her husband's return to Moncrieffe it had been growing day by day, till at last it seemed to have reached a climax. And yet Bruce had been very kind to her since his return. It is true he had been much occupied with his shooting, and she with her guests, so that they had seen as little of each other as two people living in the same house can well help doing; but still he had been kind to her in a quiet way. The girls had been too much occupied by the men staying in the house, to take the same pains as formerly to stand between their father and his wife, though perhaps the guests had done so instead. But Constance was no longer jealous of her husband's love, and cared little whether he preferred Julia's company or hers. But she recalled several annoyances to mind, by which she sought to account to herself for her general unhappiness. In the first place, Harry had been more disagreeable than ever since her disappointment about Sir Eldred, which she perversely attributed to her step-mother's artifice; and there had been endless disagreements lately about the Days, whom the girls

had gone to visit several times, in spite of their father's express orders.

Then Mrs Dean, the housekeeper, had been such a perpetual thorn in her mistress's side. She treated her with perfect respect; but her manner was sullen and disagreeable, and whenever she was able, she made a point of thwarting her mistress's plans. There were some old painted blinds across the lower panes of the schoolroom windows, which Constance had vainly endeavoured to have removed. The schoolroom was in the front of the house, and the dilapidated blinds offended Constance's eye each time she drove up to the door. The screens had been painted by Julia, in her childish days, and, being too badly executed for any other room, had been placed in the schoolroom, though it was on the second storey, and required nothing of the sort. But now they were considerably the worse for wear, and Constance asked Mrs Dean to remove them, not knowing that they were Julia's work. The woman made no reply, and received her instructions in silence; but several days afterwards Constance noticed the offending blinds in the windows, and spoke to the housekeeper again.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Mrs Dean grimly; but still the blinds were not removed.

Then Constance spoke severely, and asked

whether Mrs Dean intended to obey her or not; and Mrs Dean replied,—

"Certainly, if she were obliged; but that Miss Julia had painted the screens herself, and would be very vexed if they were removed. And I cannot find it in my heart to vex the poor, motherless lamb," she added.

So Constance had dropped the subject in despair; and this was only one of many instances of the sort. All Constance's domestic orders had to be delivered through the housekeeper, and everything she suggested was respectfully pooh-poohed by the latter. This was an insufferable state of things, and yesterday morning Constance had begged her husband's permission to dismiss her housekeeper.

"Why, my dear? have you any complaint to make of her?" he asked, looking very grave; "she has always proved a good servant hitherto."

"She hates me," replied Constance.

"You ought not to mind that, surely, my dear. It is natural she should not like you very much, seeing how attached she was to—to my first wife."

"It is very disagreeable having a servant who does all she can to disoblige and vex one," said Constance.

"Well, Constance, if you have any real

fault to find with Mrs Dean, of course you can dismiss her; but I must confess I shall be sorry if you do so," replied Bruce gravely. "She was my first wife's nurse, and has been a most kind one to my children. When poor Julia died, she particularly begged me never to part with Dean, and I promised not to do so; so you can understand, can't you, that I should not like to dismiss the woman unless you had some serious fault to find with her; and it would vex the girls, too."

"Oh, very well!" replied Constance, turning coldly away.

But her husband stepped after her, and kissed her kindly, saying,—

"I am sorry to vex you, dear; but, indeed, if Mrs Dean is impertinent to you, or anything of that sort, you shall dismiss her at once. Only so far I do not think she has given you any just cause for doing so."

To this Constance had made no reply, and Bruce had gone off to his shooting, feeling that he had vexed her deeply, though she had made no scene.

All this she recalled as she sat idly in her boudoir, and surely there was sufficient cause here for unhappiness. But not sufficient to account for the daily growing unhappiness of the past weeks, or the sickening misery of to-day.

Was it on Pearl's account that she suffered? Undoubtedly there was keen remorse in her heart when she thought of Pearl, though she was by no means responsible for the girl's having lost her heart to Sir Eldred. That she had lost it to him, Constance was sure, and each time she recalled the girl's pale, pathetic, little face, a pang of bitterest pain and remorse shot through her heart. For Pearl was eighteen now, and Constance felt that she ought to have remembered she was no longer a child, and not have thrown her so constantly into Sir Eldred's company.

She buried her face in her hands and moaned, but the opening of the door roused her with a start, and she sat upright, and caught up her work before Sir Eldred was fairly inside the door.

"Well," he began, seating himself close to her, "you see I am back in good time, am I not?"

"Oh, very!" she replied. "Did you see Pearl?"

"Yes, I saw her," he replied, in a slightly constrained tone, and then added, "I did not see any of the others; they were all out."

"Ah! they will have gone down to the station to meet Jack; he comes to-day, you know."

"Yes, Pearl said the boys had gone to

meet him. Your mother was at Dinachny. I overtook your sister before I reached Dunfern, and she was walking with that Day."

"Pearl walking with Mr Day?"

"Yes; he seemed to be talking very earnestly to her as I came up."

"He must have come up to see someone," said Constance anxiously, thinking of her step-daughters. "He would hardly take such a walk for nothing."

"No," replied the young man, who was thinking of Pearl, not the Moncrieffe girls, "I don't suppose he would. I saw him paying Pearl attention that day he came here first, and I warned her against him, for, indeed, he is no fit friend for her. But she doesn't seem to have hearkened to my words of wisdom. People seldom do take good advice—at least, not when *I* offer it. Your sister looked rather put out when I came up, as if she'd been 'caught;' but the fellow wasn't to be shaken off. He walked into the house with her quite as a matter of course, and I left him there when I came away."

"Were they alone?"

"They were; but don't look so reproachfully at me, Constance, the fellow evidently meant to outsit me, and I wanted to get home in good time to—to say good-bye, you know."

"You shouldn't speak as if it were all Pearl's fault; she isn't a bit of a flirt."

"I think she is," replied Sir Eldred. "But she won't have been left long alone, for as I was coming away I met Lady de Vere driving your mother home."

"I am glad of that, and I am sure poor Pearl would be glad to see her mother too. I think you are unjust to blame her."

"You ought to know best, Constance; perhaps I am. She is a sweet little thing anyway, and as your sister, I am bound to be fond of her."

"Did you speak to mother?" asked Constance hastily, and bending her face lower over her work.

"Oh, yes, they stopped and spoke to me. Lady de Vere was so kind as to invite me to Dinachny for her ball on the first of October; and I accepted, with thanks, so you will see me turning up again before long."

"But—isn't it a long way to come for a ball?" suggested Constance. "You are going to the south of England, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am; but I shall return for the ball all the same."

For some reason best known to herself, Constance refrained from asking why, and for a couple of minutes they remained silent.

"Pearl tells me she is going to stay at

Dinachny too, about the time of the ball," remarked Sir Eldred presently.

"Yes, Aunt Louisa is so helpless, and she thinks Pearl will be handy and useful in writing notes, and giving orders, etc."

Constance spoke mechanically, almost without knowing what she said, and at the minute her mind was too confused to understand that Pearl and Sir Eldred were likely to be at Dinachny together; but after an interval of silence, during which she stitched diligently, and Sir Eldred sat staring gloomily into the fire (the weather had broken lately, and a log fire was very acceptable), it did dawn upon her understanding that there would be danger for her little sister in being in the same house with the handsome young baronet.

For several minutes she pondered whether she could do or say anything to lessen that danger, and at last she began, falteringly,—

"Eldred, I want to ask you something."

He laid down the poker, with which he had been vengefully pushing about the logs on the fire, and turned towards her, wondering what she could have to say.

"I want you to promise me something," she continued, flushing slightly.

"You know I would do anything in the world for you, Constance," he answered, gravely and earnestly.

"It is nothing very tremendous," she said, with a short, forced laugh. "I only want you to refrain from flirting with Pearl when you meet her at Dinachny."

For a minute the young man was too amazed to reply, and Constance added lightly,—

"You may not know it, perhaps, but you have such a charming way of making love to every lady you meet—"

"Constance!"

"Well, it is true, though of course you deny it. I daresay it does no harm as a general rule; but Pearl is such a child for her age, and I do not want you to turn her head."

"Have I turned it?"

For a minute she did not answer, then she said, slowly,—

"Perhaps I ought not to speak so to you; only—I think—I feel that I can trust you."

"You know you can," he replied, eagerly.

"I do not say," she continued, hesitatingly, "that you have already turned the child's head—I do not think there—is any real harm done yet; only—you have been very kind to her—don't be so kind to her at Dinachny."

It was rather difficult for Sir Eldred to know what to reply to this, so he remained silent; and Constance wondered whether she

had been justified in speaking of her sister as she had.

"You will not abuse my confidence?" she said, plaintively. "I have not done wrong, have I? You will not misunderstand me?"

"You may trust me in all things, Constance," he replied, gravely, taking her hands and pressing them to his lips. "Your sister is as dear to me as if she were my own—I am sure you know that. Yes, you were quite right to speak to me; I shall not misunderstand you; from this minute I forget all you have said."

Constance was frightened, and withdrawing her hand quietly, she rose and walked up to the fire, as if to consult the tiny enamelled timepiece on the mantlepiece. She could not make out what o'clock it was, but neither did she venture to return to the sofa, lest her companion should see how she was trembling. So she stood before the fire apparently warming her feet, and suffered her eyes to roam over the hearth-rug, and neighbouring carpet. Presently they fell upon a small blue object, and half unconsciously she stooped and picked it up, and to her surprise recognised the ring which she had given to Harry on her last birthday, in Rome.

"What is it?" asked Sir Eldred, rising and approaching her. "Ah! my ring."

"Yours?" repeated Constance slowly. "It is the one I gave to Harry—she lost it in the Borghese Gardens."

"She threw your gift wilfully from her, and I picked it up," he replied, quietly, as he took the ring from her, and replaced it in his waistcoat pocket.

She watched his action, too bewildered to remonstrate—then their eyes met—and she knew all.

It was only for a couple of seconds; with a quick movement Constance turned away her head, while a hot rush of blood mounted to her face, and then receded, leaving her white as marble. She sank back into a chair, and clasped her hands tightly together on her lap, while hot and rebellious the tears mounted to her eyes.

Oh, shame and agony! Was she about to disgrace herself by weeping? Should she let this man see that she was shedding tears for him?

How she managed it, she never afterwards knew; but by an almost superhuman effort, she succeeded in driving the tears back to her overladen heart, and sat on, pale and calm as a statue.

Sir Eldred stood by the window, with his back to her, drumming on the panes with his fingers. There was a mist before his eyes

which prevented him seeing the dog-cart, which was to convey him to the station, approaching the door; nor did the sound of its wheels reach his ear.

At that moment he was almost more moved than Constance, yet he stood with his back turned to her, and gave no sign of the conflict raging within him.

I fear it was not any very high moral principle that made him thus turn from Constance in her distress, but rather the greatness and generosity of his love for her.

He was longing to utter some word of tenderness to comfort her; but he knew that if he did this he would injure himself in her eyes, and also tear her from the pedestal which she occupied in his mind. People called Sir Eldred an affected dandy, and a pleasant, good-natured, empty-brained fool, who would flirt with his own grandmother if there were no other lady at hand; and, no doubt, he in a great measure merited this judgment; but there was good in him too, and Constance had always called all that was best in him to the fore. Just now it was her good influence that kept him silent; he had seen the fierce determination with which she had subdued her own feelings, and could he do less than follow her example?

So he stood by the window till Bruce's voice

came from below, calling loudly for his cousin, and with a start the young man remembered that it was time for him to go.

"By Jove! it's time for me to be off," he muttered, turning towards the hearth, where Constance still sat, white and immovable.

At his words, and the sound of her husband's voice, she rose and held out one hand mechanically, while with the other she leant, as if for support, on the back of a chair.

"Good-bye, my dear," he muttered, unsteadily. "God bless you!" he added, pressing her hand passionately to his lips; and then he dashed out of the room, leaving Constance standing mute and wretched.

For a minute she stood thus, gazing at the door through which he had disappeared, and then she sank down on the chair beside her, and burying her face in her hands, burst into a flood of agonising tears.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPY.

THERE was no one to see her, so why should she not weep? Constance felt, as she cowered sobbing on her chair; but scarcely had the thought passed through her mind, when the sound of a door turning on its hinges made her look up with a start. There were two doors to the room; one, through which Sir Eldred had made his exit, opening into the general landing; and the other, across which was drawn a *portière*, leading into a small, seldom-used passage. It was from this latter that the sound seemed to proceed, and on looking towards it, Constance saw that the curtain before it had got displaced, and was still vibrating, as though someone had lately touched it.

A sudden pang of terror darted through

Constance's heart, for now she remembered that some time ago, when Sir Eldred was standing in the window, and she sitting struggling for composure on this very chair, she had seen the curtain vibrate in a similar manner. She had been too dazed and bewildered at that minute to notice the circumstance, and had merely supposed that the draught, to exclude which the *portière* had been hung there, had moved it. But now it flashed across her that someone must have been in the room, watching her and Sir Eldred all along, and her heart gave a great throb of fear.

She rose, trembling, and opening the door slightly, peeped down the little, dark passage. Yes, there was Mrs Dean disappearing round the corner, and Constance felt that she was in the power of this woman who was her enemy. It was true that very little had passed between her and Sir Eldred that could really be found fault with ; but of course there was sufficient to make the foundation of a very suspicious story. Everything would depend upon how the facts were handled, and what sort of light was thrown upon them, and Constance knew that she must expect the worst from Mrs Dean's treatment of them. Would the woman tell Bruce ? But of course she would, and would probably add to the

story, and make it as bad as possible. Perhaps she would tell Bruce that his cousin had kissed her (Constance's) lips instead of her hands! Constance grew sick at heart as she thought all these things; for though Bruce might refuse to listen to all Mrs Dean had to say, yet he must understand the drift of her story before he could attempt to silence her—and how can a man silence a woman who is bent upon speaking. Something he *must* hear; and he would not speak to his wife on the subject and give her an opportunity of clearing herself, or if he did speak, what could she say to him? Certainly she could assure him that Sir Eldred had only kissed her hands, but could she deny that she had wept at his departure?

She buried her face in her hands in an agony of shame to think that her servant had witnessed those tears. She wished that she was dead; she wished that she had never been born; she wished that the earth would swallow her up, or that she might flee away where she would never see anyone she knew again. It was the agony of shame and humbled pride which made her writhe at that moment. How could she face her husband when she knew that she was disgraced in his eyes? And it would be more insupportable to her than ever having Mrs Dean in the

house, and being obliged to have dealings with her now. But it was useless to think of getting rid of her; Bruce would never allow that.

"Oh, how wicked I am!" she cried, suddenly starting up, and clasping her hands in an access of despair. "How wicked, and how miserable!"

And certainly to one like her, the consciousness of wrong-doing was misery in itself. All the lessons she had learned as a child at her mother's knee; all her own preconceived ideas of the duty a wife owed to her husband, came back to her now, and filled her with a sense of her own wickedness. Not that there had been anything very far wrong with her actions; but—!

And Bruce had really tried to be kind to her lately—indeed, he had never been otherwise than kind. His formal, reserved manner had frightened and repelled her when they first married, but he had not meant it to do so; nor had he intended to show her that he cared more for his girls than for her. And yet—and yet she felt that he was in a great measure to blame for the present state of things; but then so was she also to blame.

A knock at the door roused her at last, and the servant announced that Mr de Vere was in the drawing-room.

"Mr de Vere!" she repeated, half bewildered for a minute. And then it flashed across her that it must be Jack.

Of course, he was to arrive at home this afternoon, and now he had come over to see her. She stood in front of the glass a minute, while she passed her hand over her hair, and tried to smile at herself, and look cheerful; for, of course, Jack would expect her to smile on him when they met. Dear Jack! of course she was glad to see him again; yet until this minute she had absolutely forgotten his existence, and now she wished that he had deferred his visit till to-morrow.

She went into the drawing-room without any undue haste, but when she got there she did manage to smile, and look pleased to see her brother.

"Well, old girl, and how has the world been wagging with you since I saw you last?" was his not very elegant greeting, as he replaced a painted photo of Harry, taken in her presentation dress, on the table, and advanced to bestow a hearty hug on his favourite sister. "Why, you don't look very bobbish," he added, taking a second look at her.

"I have a little headache to-day," she replied, evasively, "that is all."

"You ought to go for a cruise round the

Pacific; that would soon blow all your headaches overboard. By George! what a jolly idea! Suppose you get Moncrieffe to set up a yacht. I'd be captain if you like."

"But I don't like the sea. I am sorry Bruce is out; but he must be in soon, for it is a quarter to seven. We dine at half-past —you will stay, of course."

"No, thanks; I've promised to spend this evening at home, and I've had tea already."

"Well, I suppose mother must wish to have you with her?"

"Of course. I say, this is Harry, isn't it?" he added, returning to the portrait again.

"Yes; how do you know?"

"Oh, I saw her at Dinachny—I called there on my way up. She's no end of a jolly girl—and handsome too."

"Yes, she is handsome," replied Constance unenthusiastically. "But for goodness' sake don't call her Harry to her face; she was quite offended with Fred for doing so."

"Oh, Fred's a young duffer. I heard dreadful accounts of her from the boys; but all I know is that she was uncommonly civil to me."

"It must certainly have been *uncommonly*, for as a rule she is anything but civil to my people."

"Well, at first she didn't know who I was,

you see. As I was passing Dinachny on my way up, Sir Charles hove in sight, and bore down upon me, and of course I had to stop and salute him. He would insist on my going in to see Aunt Louie, and I couldn't get off it, though I knew mother and Pearl must be dying to see me; so I sent the boys on to let them know I would soon be home, and went into Dinachny. Aunt Louie wasn't in the drawing-room, so Sir Charles left me there while he went to fetch her, and then Miss Harry came in, and as we neither of us knew who the other was, we were mighty civil to each other. It was a good time before Sir Charles returned with Aunt Louie in tow, and it was only then that we were formally introduced to each other."

"I don't expect you found her quite so civil when she knew who you were?"

"But I did, though," replied Jack, stroking his small moustache, with a complacent smile.

He was a good-looking young fellow, though not exactly handsome (the De Vere girls had usurped all the real beauty of the family), and he was accustomed to find young ladies civil to him.

"She will make up for it by being doubly rude by-and-by," said Constance, feeling irritated to see that her pet brother was disposed to admire her little-loved step-daughter.

Jack only laughed confidently in reply, and just then Moncrieffe came in, and Constance had to introduce her brother to her husband.

The two men greeted each other cordially, and Moncrieffe repeated his wife's invitation to dinner; but Jack said he had promised to spend his first evening at home, and had only come over to get a sight of Constance for half-an-hour.

"I didn't know you were here till a couple of minutes ago," said Bruce. "I was in the library; but no one told me till Simmons brought in the lamp."

"I thought you were out," said Constance.

"No, I have been in above an hour," he replied.

It was the first time he had addressed her since entering the room, and even now he did not look at her.

So he had been in the house a whole hour! Then there had been plenty of time for Mrs Dean to carry her tale to him had she been so minded, was the idea which flashed across Constance's mind. Had she done so? or would she wait till he had retired to his smoking-room after dinner? How earnestly Constance longed for her brother to remain to dinner, and break her *tête-à-tête* with Bruce; but all too soon the young sailor rose to leave.

"You must come over and lunch here to-morrow; or come after breakfast, and we will have another try at the old birds."

"Thanks, but I have promised to go over to Dinachny to-morrow."

"Ah, they have partridges about there!" said Moncrieffe. "There's hardly enough low ground for good sport here."

And then the two men went out of the room, and Constance, seeing that it was already a quarter past seven, hurried up to her room, and performed her evening toilette as speedily as possible. But all the while she was wondering whether her husband had seen Mrs Dean yet. The gong had sounded before she was quite ready, and on entering the drawing-room, she found Bruce waiting for her. He followed her into the dining-room without a word, and all through dinner he remained very silent. Did he know? she wondered in an agony of doubt. She made one or two nervous efforts at conversation, and was relieved when he answered her readily, if not very cheerfully. At any rate there was no displeasure in his tone, and she was inclined to believe that Mrs Dean had as yet said nothing to him. As for his appearing dull and preoccupied, there was nothing remarkable in that. Had he ever been anything but dull and *ennuiéd* when alone with

her—his wife? At the present minute this reflection was a relief rather than a mortification to her; yet, after all, it made very little difference whether Mrs Dean spoke to him to-day or to-morrow. Sooner or later, she would be sure to do so, and then—how much of her tale would Bruce believe?

With these thoughts weighing on her mind, it was hardly to be expected that the poor, young woman should be very bright; and Bruce saw her depression, and thought he understood the cause. He gave no sign that he did so, however, and after dinner he followed her into the drawing-room as usual, and sat reading on one side of the fire, while she worked on the other. It was the same piece of work with which she had occupied herself during her interview with Sir Eldred, and now she saw that she had done it all wrong, and had to unpick a large piece of it. She was angry and ashamed as she did so; it brought her folly home to her as nothing else had yet done. She glanced furtively across at her husband, to see whether he noticed that she was unpicking her work (as if he could have understood anything had he done so!), but he seemed absorbed in his reading, and hardly raised his eyes from the page before him until the tea came in. He thanked Constance when she brought him a

cup, and placed it beside him, and laying down his book he showed that he was prepared to talk, or be talked to. But Constance could think of little to say, and to that little he hardly responded, though he really tried to do so. The feeling of effort that pervaded the conversation was painful, and Bruce soon gave it up.

"Ten o'clock," he said. "I think I'll go and get my smoke over now, and get to bed early for once."

So he left the room, feeling that his absence would be a relief to his wife. It was always so now, he reflected bitterly; his absence was always a relief to her. He remembered that drive to Dunfern Cottage, when she had preferred having Mr Macdougal beside her to being alone with him—her husband. And yet it had not always been so. She had seemed pleased enough to be with him when they first married. What had he done to repel her since then?

And Constance sat alone, feeling very miserable, and very much ashamed of herself. It was only now that her self-respect and pride were so deeply wounded, that she knew how intensely proud she was by nature. Some might say that she had behaved with much discretion and self-control, taking things as a whole; but she could not think so, and

felt as if her shame and humiliation would kill her. And others knew of her disgrace too! To how many people besides Bruce would Mrs Dean repeat her cruel tale? Constance felt that she could hardly face her own servants if they too knew of that tale.

Very wearily she at last betook herself to bed. Her maid remarked that the house seemed very quiet now, and lamented the departure of Sir Eldred Glendower; but Constance stopped her rather sharply, and as soon as she could, dismissed her. She did not go to bed at once, but sat over her fire thinking (for fires are very acceptable among the Scotch Highlands, towards the beginning of September). Presently, however, she was roused by a slight noise overhead—it sounded like a foot-fall; yet how could anyone be in that old, haunted room at this hour? Glancing towards the little door at the head of the bed, she saw that it was ajar, and hastily rising, she shut it, though, as there was no lock or bolt, she could not fasten it securely. As she stood beside it, she heard a fresh sound from above, which made her blood run cold. It sounded like something being dragged stealthily across the floor; and then, as she stood paralysed, she recognised it as the chink of chains.

At that moment Bruce's step was heard

outside, and with a cry that echoed through the whole tower, she flew out of the room, and threw herself into his arms.

"What is the matter, my darling?" he asked, soothingly, as he held her firmly in his arms.

The feeling of that strong clasp reassured her, and she was able to gasp out the cause of her alarm.

"What, ghosts?" repeated Moncrieffe, leading her back to her room gently. "Who told you about a ghost in the tower?"

"Mrs Dean," she replied, glancing round with a suppressed shiver towards the door of the staircase.

"Mrs Dean be d—d!" said Moncrieffe, with considerable energy; and though Constance was rather surprised to hear him speak thus of his paragon, she was hardly as shocked at the use of that wicked word as she ought to have been. "Now what about this ghost?" said Moncrieffe, in a loud, cheerful voice, as he got his wife seated beside the fire once more; but the sound of his voice seemed to have frightened the spirit away, for nothing more was heard of it that night.

By-and-by Moncrieffe persuaded his wife to go to bed, and sat beside her till she grew less nervous.

"You won't be nervous when you know I

am in the next room, will you?" he asked, before he went into his dressing-room; and she replied in the negative.

She was not frightened, so long as she had anyone near her, and all the rest of that night she heard nothing to alarm her. But the following day she was rather unwell, owing to the fright she had received; and, to tell the truth, she was very glad of this excuse for remaining quietly in her room, and not having to seem cheerful and composed as usual.

Bruce was very kind to her, and she felt certain Mrs Dean could have said nothing to him yet. But for this very reason she felt herself the more in the woman's power. Perhaps, after all, Mrs Dean did not mean to repeat what she had seen to her master; she might be afraid of receiving her dismissal if she did so; for, of course, she would have to confess how she had played eavesdropper—a story which would hardly redound to her credit. But all the same Constance felt that she was completely in her power. If she angered the woman, she was quite capable of telling all to Bruce.

There was a suppressed triumph in Mrs Dean's manner to her mistress from this time forth, which the latter dared not resent. Mrs Dean knew quite well that Mrs Moncrieffe had peeped after her down the passage

on that unlucky afternoon (though Constance herself had no idea that Mrs Dean had seen her), and so she was often almost insolent to the unfortunate young lady, understanding that she dared not complain to her husband of her housekeeper's conduct. Not that Mrs Dean ever *said* anything absolutely insolent to her mistress; but Constance felt her look and manner and general air when addressing her to be an insufferable insult. Yet, insufferable though it might be, she had to endure it.

CHAPTER III.

FRANK'S ELECTIONEERING.

IT was a very sore point with Julia that her step-mother would not allow her to wear trailing skirts, as she had done when she lived with her grandmother at Brighton. In those happy days, Julia had always worn "tails" in the evening, and she would have worn them in the day time too, had short skirts not been the fashion; but now everything she wore was studiously simple, to show that, tall though she was, she was not yet out. This was a severe trial to Julia, and was one of the causes why she hated her step-mother.

The German governess was also a great vexation to her. At Brighton she had attended daily classes, but then she had had the companionship of the other girls to console her, and at home she was free, and her own mis-

tress; but it was a very different thing to be shut up in a London schoolroom, in a gay house where, unless a girl is "out," she is seldom or never allowed to show.

During the last two months Fräulein had been having a holiday in Germany, and Julia had been free to amuse herself in the less conventional country-house life; but now the time was approaching when the Fräulein was to return, and Julia was busy preparing a plan of war in her own mind, whereby to rout, and utterly confound the coming foe.

In the meantime she was enjoying herself very much at Dinachny, where she met a fresh set of people, and where she was more her own mistress than at home. It was only her sweet manner which had induced Lady de Vere to invite her and her sister at all, for Harry had been anything but agreeable to the De Veres during their brief visit to Moncrieffe. But Julia had so won upon her ladyship, that now she was invited to Dinachny with Harry. The latter had been disposed to refuse the invitation point blank; but at last Julia's prayers and her father's commands had prevailed, and now that she was actually at Dinachny, she too found it very pleasant. It was on the day after her arrival that she first saw Jack de Vere, and since then he had been a pretty constant visitor at Dinachny, and he and

Harry became firm friends, to the intense astonishment of Julia, and the vexation of Jack's sisters. Had Harry met the young man at Moncrieffe, she would probably have snubbed him as she snubbed all Constance's relations; but as it was, she had made friends with him before she knew who he was, and then the piquante idea occurred to her that it would be good sport to win him over to be her partisan against his own sisters.

Once Pearl came up to Dinachny with her brother, and Harry saw that she was vexed by the attention which Jack paid her (Harry), and she redoubled her efforts to please him.

He was the pet brother of the family (probably because he was so much from home), and of course his sisters would be vexed if he espoused the enemy's cause, and at present it seemed highly probable that he would espouse it, for he voted Harry an out-and-out brick, and shrugged his shoulders and laughed good-naturedly when Pearl informed him of her various iniquities. Perhaps he was not a little flattered too, that he should succeed in taming this charming shrew, when all his family had failed to propitiate her. He was a good son, and a good brother, and had he seen any want of respect in Harry's manner to either his mother or Constance, he would have resented it bitterly; but so far Harry had

been guilty of no offence in his presence, and he merely laughed at Pearl and the boys' tales.

Harry and Julia had only been invited to Dinachny originally for one week, but, at the end of that time, Lady de Vere pressed them to stay on, and they agreed to do so. Jack de Vere also came to stay at Dinachny during this last week, and he and Harry became inseparable — indeed, to cut a long story short, it may be as well to state that before the end of the fortnight which Harry spent at Dinachny, the two young people had fallen over head and ears in love with each other.

Harry was now able to look back with wonder to the days when she had imagined herself in love with Sir Eldred. He had been handsome and amusing, and she had liked him in a way—but what a very different way to *this!* Sir Eldred appeared an affected, empty-brained fop in her eyes, compared to this stalwart young tar, and she blushed with vexation as she remembered the open way in which she had spoken about Sir Eldred to Constance. Supposing Constance were to repeat the whole story to Jack! But no, somehow Harry could not imagine Constance doing such a thing.

Lady de Vere saw what was going on well enough—and encouraged it. It would be a

capital match for Jack, and for Harry's prospects her ladyship did not much care. So she threw the young couple together as much as she could, and would have pressed Harry to remain with her longer, had the Moncrieffes not been engaged to spend the two last weeks of September visiting at friends' houses.

On the day before Harry's departure, too, an event occurred which rendered Jack's absence from Dinachny necessary. The election of C— was to take place towards the end of the month, and lately Josh had been kept pretty busy with one thing and another. The poor young man had been very unhappy lately, for, in the first place, Harry Moncrieffe had entirely thrown him over for Jack; and secondly, he was perpetually having to address meetings of the C— electors, and speech-making was a real penance to him. Add that these meetings and canvassing expeditions were perpetually making him late for his meals, and it will be understood that poor Josh's cup of misery was filled to overflowing.

On this particular day he was to address a large concourse of the free electors of C— from the balcony of the "Green Dragon," the principal hotel of the place. He was in an agony, and confided to Frank and Fred de Vere, whom he chanced to meet that morn-

ing, that he hadn't the remotest idea what to say.

"My gov and Mr Mackay told me last night," he said, "but I'm sure I shall forget, as I did last time, and the people will laugh at me again."

"Never mind, old boy," said Frank consolingly, "it will all be over in a few days now."

"I was speaking of *to-day*," returned Josh pettishly.

"I'll tell you what," cried Frank, "take me to C— with you, and I'll make your speech for you."

"But you won't know what to say," objected Josh doubtfully.

"Oh, I know the sort of gibberish you talk well enough—"

"It isn't gibberish," said Josh, offended.

"Well, as I am a Conservative, I may be excused for thinking so, I suppose. But, anyway, I can palaver away in true Republican style, like old boots. Oh, I can, I assure you; why, I'd make the hair of the biggest Radical in England stand on end, I promise you."

"But my gov and Mr Mackay are to go with me," said Josh, hesitating. "They won't let you speak, you know."

"Don't go back to Dinachny," suggested Fred. "Just come on with us, and give the old gentlemen the slip."

"But I can't walk all the way to C—," grumbled Josh.

"Well, cut off to the stables and order out a dog-cart, and we'll all drive together."

So it was settled, and in due time the three young men made their appearance at the Green Dragon. At the appointed hour they stepped out into the balcony, and beheld a goodly number of people assembled in the market-place below, for this happened to be a fine day (the first there had been for a month, by the way), and people had been encouraged to leave the shelter of their houses, to listen to Josh de Vere's eloquence. Frank was a tall, fine grown lad of seventeen, and he had plenty of pluck and self-assurance. He was a stranger in the country as yet, and had not often been in C—, which was a good way from Dunfern Cottage, and as he stepped forward to address the assemblage, a considerable amount of curiosity was roused, as to who he could be.

"Gentlemen, and electors of C—," he began—he was not quite certain if this was a correct commencement, but fancied it must be. "Gentlemen, and electors of C—,—or rather, free and enlightened electors; for, as a Liberal, I object to the word *gentleman.* Why should one man be a *gentle*man and another only a *man?* Why should Sir Charles

de Vere be *Sir* Charles, and *I* only plain Mister? That is what I call inconsistent in a Liberal. If Sir Charles were sincere he would drop his title—or hand it over to someone else. But to return to what I was about to say at the commencement of my speech —my cousin, Mr Joshua de Vere, is suffering from a severe sore throat, which entirely deprives him of the use of his voice, and therefore he has entrusted me to act as his mouthpiece, and lay before you, to the best of my abilities, his—his" (here Frank hesitated, and seemed rather at a loss how to express himself, but wound up with a grand flourish) "views and sentiments, and the reforms towards which his efforts will be directed, when, with your assistance and support, he finds himself among the rulers of this great and prosperous country.

"In the first place, he proposes to effect a sweeping improvement in the game laws, with which our country is afflicted" (cries of hear, hear), "or in other words, to improve them off the face of the earth." (Laughter.) "It seems to me marvellous how men, calling themselves just and honest (and no doubt believing themselves to be so), can so long have continued to support gross injustice and tyranny under the name of the law. What do these game laws amount to? Simply to this—

no one is allowed to kill the wild creatures, which were intended by Providence for the use of all the sons of Adam indiscriminately, save a few lords of the soil, who slaughter the poor beasts" (in Scotland fowls and birds are all dubbed *beasties* indiscriminately), "not for the sake of eating them, so much as for the pleasure of seeing them die! The poor man would kill the game only when he wished to provide a good dinner for his wife and children, and in such a case the deed would be a worthy one, and deserving of praise; but these bloated aristocrats murder the innocent creatures without any such motive to excuse them—in short, they do it for pleasure. And in order that they may indulge in this cruel pastime, the poor are forbidden to touch the manna which is sent them from heaven." (Cheers.) "My friend here" (indicating Josh) "is so deeply impressed with this view of the matter, that he intends to throw his preserves open to the public when he reigns in his father's stead."

"Oh come, I say, you know!" expostulated Josh *sotto voce.*

"Of course there are people who say that such policy would be the ruin of Scotland—that it would be like killing the goose that laid the golden eggs; but shall we listen to them? They are weak-hearted panderers to fashion, and lack the energy to throw off

ancient abuses. They whisper timidly that, unless the game be preserved, it will soon become extinct; that the selfish rich man will refuse to spend his money in Scotland when his favourite occupation is gone. I certainly fear that Sir Charles de Vere, Liberal though he calls himself, would hardly care to spend six months out of the year at Dinachny if all his friends had left the country. I fear it is true that all the landed proprietors who could afford to do so would fly the country, and that the shop and hotel-keepers would suffer severely in consequence. But what of that? Are shopkeepers the only class to be considered? Let us pillage the lairds, and then, when we have acquired an appetite for plunder, we will pillage the farmers; and I think we shall find sheep and chickens rather more substantial than grouse and pheasants—"

But here cries and groans drowned Frank's voice, and Josh began to remonstrate vehemently with him,—

"That isn't what my gov and Mr Mackay told me to say at all," he said, sulkily; "and I'm sure my gov will be very angry about what you said of him."

But here Frank again managed to obtain a hearing, and continued,—

"What was that you were saying, my friends? The farmer pays for his sheep and

his chickens? Well—and don't the lairds pay for their game? Don't pheasants cost as much to feed and keep as chickens? And when you have polished off the game, and driven out the landlords, what are you to do unless you turn upon the shopkeepers and farmers and help yourselves to what you want?"

But by this time the audience had begun to realise that they were being laughed at, and the hubbub rose to such a height, that Frank's voice was drowned completely. Rotten eggs and hard potatoes rained upon the balcony, and Josh retreated precipitately into the house, though not before he had received an egg on his ear.

"I wish I hadn't come with you fellows," he said, angrily, as he rubbed the egg off his ear and shoulder, upon which it was dropping. "You've made a jolly mess of it, you have. I wonder what my gov and Mr Mackay will say? of course they'll scold me."

"Poor dear, you mustn't fret your little hearty-party if your daddy does scold you."

"Oh, you always laugh at a fellow after getting him into a row," cried Josh furiously. "I— I— I—"

"Go on; let us hear the end of your interesting remark."

But Josh relapsed into sulky silence, knowing from old experience that he always got

the worst of it in a wordy war with his cousins.

It was exactly at the minute when the speechmakers were beating their retreat from the balcony that the Dinachny carriage, with Sir Charles and Mr Mackay in it, appeared in sight. They had waited vainly for Josh to appear before starting for C—, and had hunted high and low for him; but being unable to find him, they concluded that he had either forgotten the meeting at C—, or taken himself out of the way to avoid it. Sir Charles's anger was great; but at last he set off for C— without his son, intending to announce to the electors that Josh was prevented from accompanying him by a severe and sudden attack of illness. Great, then, was his surprise when, on turning into the C— market-place, he perceived his son on the balcony, while Frank de Vere appeared to be addressing the crowd below. The crowd did not seem in a very good humour, and Sir Charles's appearance called forth a shower of groans and hisses. At the same minute eggs and potatoes made their appearance in the air; the groans rose to shouts, and Josh and his cousins disappeared from the balcony.

"Drive on, drive on," shouted the baronet irately, as the coachman came to a dead stop.

But this was easier said than done; for the carriage was now surrounded by an angry crowd, and it seemed impossible either to advance or retreat.

"For goodness' sake *turn*," cried the baronet, and after considerable difficulty the coachman did turn and set off as fast as he could for home, but not before the two occupants of the carriage had been well anointed with eggs and mud, and presented a truly lamentable spectacle. The mob, seeing their plight, made way for them to pass, amid derisive cheers and laughs, and, as a parting salutation, a dead cat, not very fresh, was flung into Sir Charles's arms. The baronet's rage was tremendous. He swore at his son, and he swore at his nephews, and he swore at the inhabitants of C—, high and low. "As for that young fool, Josh, he might take his chance of getting home," he said; "*he* was not going to wait for him."

And for some time Josh and his cousins remained in hiding in the Green Dragon, not venturing to come out and face the insulted mob. At last, however, when the latter had dispersed, the three cousins sneaked out of the back door of the hotel, and ordered the dog-cart to follow them, and meet them outside the town. They got away unmolested, and were soon overtaken by the dog-cart, and Frank's spirits rose again, and he seemed dis-

posed to treat the whole matter as a capital joke. But Josh remained gloomy and morose.

"It's all very well for you fellows to laugh," he remarked, moodily, "but all the blame will fall on me when I get home. And I shall be late for dinner too."

Frank and Fred were dropped at their own door, and then poor Josh drove home, feeling that he had been very hardly used, and that he was going to have all the blame of the affair laid upon him. When he reached Dinachny, he found his father waiting to receive him in his library, and pour upon him the vials of his wrath. For some time Josh could not get in a word in his own defence, and at last he turned sulky, and marched out of the room, leaving his father to fume by himself. When at last Sir Charles did ask Josh for an account of the affair, the young man at first refused to speak, and then laid all the blame on "those fellows," his cousins.

The following morning an account of the whole thing appeared in the local papers, together with Frank's speech, and Sir Charles, as Josh had predicted, was furious at the part which referred to himself.

This was the day of Harry's return home, and with her departed Jack's chief attraction at Dinachny. He found it very unpleasant

staying in the house now that his uncle was in such a bad humour, and returned to Dunfern Cottage that same day. Mrs de Vere was greatly distressed by her boys' conduct. Sir Charles had been so kind to her, and now her son had probably lost Josh the election.

And so indeed it proved, for when the contest came off, a few days later, the Conservative candidate, who had hitherto entertained but faint hopes of success, was returned by a small majority of one.

"Hurrah!" cried the graceless Frank, when he had heard the news, "I'm a Conservative, and I've won the election."

CHAPTER IV.

JULIA GOES TO DRUM.

IT was with considerably depressed spirits that the two Moncrieffe girls returned home. Harry had been looking forward to the visits which she was about to pay with considerable pleasure, but now she felt suddenly reluctant to leave the country in which Jack de Vere resided; and Julia was trembling at the prospect of being again placed under her governess. But when she reached Moncrieffe Castle, the joyful tidings awaited her, that poor Fräulein had sprained her foot, and would not be able to travel for at least three weeks. Julia was in ecstacies at the news; but Constance was in serious perplexity what to do with the girl during the coming fortnight, when she and Bruce and Harry would all be from home. To leave Julia alone in the house

would be impossible, though the girl herself begged hard for this, and was highly indignant with Constance for objecting. But Moncrieffe quite agreed with his wife, and so Julia affected to yield gracefully. She declared herself quite able to solve the difficulty, and set off that same afternoon for Drum, without informing anyone of her intention. She found Mrs M'Mickie at home, and at once plunging into the business upon which she had come, asked the old lady to receive her for a week or so while the others were from home. She put her request very prettily, and looked very sweet as she spoke; but the rich old lady did not seem quite as flattered as Julia had expected.

"Hum!" was all she would say for some time, and then she inquired, tartly,—"Did your father send you here?"

"Oh, no, dear aunt; I came quite of my own accord," cried Julia prettily.

"Hum! Then your father and mother know nothing about what you're after?"

"It was entirely my own idea to come to you," said Julia, feeling rather small, but striving valiantly to maintain a smiling exterior.

"Then, in my opinion, you'd better go and find out what they wish you to do."

"Oh, they talk of sending me to Dunfern

Cottage; but indeed I would *so* much rather come to you."

"Talk of sending you to Dunfern Cottage, do they? And what may your objection be to doing as they tell you, missie?"

What an awful old woman! Julia felt inclined to scratch her; and there was something decidedly *sucre-aigre* in her smile as she replied,—

"I would rather be with *you*, if you don't mind, dear aunt. I don't much like the De Veres."

"Don't you? I do. I liked that speech that boy made the other day. I don't suppose that daft Josh de Vere will get in—and serve him right too. You don't like Pearl, do you?"

"No, I can't say I do much. She's—"

"She's too pretty, eh? She's a deal better-looking than you are, my dear. And so she took all the young men away from you, did she? No wonder you don't like her. Well, you may come to me if you can get your father to let you."

And with this ungracious permission Julia had to be content. It was very odd, she thought, as she walked home, that Mrs M'Mickie should not like her better than she did. She liked Constance and Sir Eldred because they yielded to her, and why

should not she (Julia) yield as sweetly as they?

Julia determined that, when she went to stay at Drum, she would make herself so charming to the old lady that she should learn to like her better than either Sir Eldred or Constance. Julia had her own reasons for wishing to secure a partisan in Mrs M'Mickie. The days were coming when she might be glad to have such a powerful friend.

When she got home she felt rather shy about informing her family what she had done. She said nothing to Constance or Harry, but took occasion to inform her father, in their presence, that she wished to go to Drum, instead of Dunfern Cottage.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Constance thoughtlessly, "I shouldn't advise you to do that. You will be miserable at Drum."

"Perhaps I shall get on better there than you did," retorted Julia. "You were very vexed at having to go, and I daresay Aunt M'Mickie saw you were not pleased to be with her, and was offended. Indeed, I think it would have been far better if you had not gone, for you did no good there, and Aunt M'Mickie won't come here now, because she says the whole house is given up to vanity, and you are as worldly as we are."

Julia was careful to speak gently, because her father was in the room, but there was a good deal of bitterness in her heart. She considered that Constance had not fulfilled her mission when she went to Drum, for Mrs M'Mickie found great fault with her, and complained that she was a thoroughly worldly-minded young woman. Yet, in spite of this, the old lady liked her; but she would not say so, and Julia felt very angry with her step-mother in consequence.

"I believe Constance would rather Sir Eldred got the money than Harry or I," thought the girl to herself; and perhaps she was not so far wrong in this.

"I cannot fawn upon people," said Constance, colouring.

"I expect that's the reason the old woman likes you as much as she does," struck in Harry. She was disgusted with Julia—and, besides Constance was Jack's sister. "She likes Sir Eldred too, and yet she is always finding fault with him."

"Am I to understand, Julia, that you have asked your aunt to receive you?" asked Moncrieffe.

He was vexed to think of Julia's being exposed to Mrs M'Mickie's temper; and yet when he remembered how offended he had been with Constance for shrinking from a

similar visit, he did not like to show his annoyance too openly.

"Yes, papa, dear," replied Julia. "I don't want to go to Dunfern Cottage."

"Very well; you can please yourself, of course," replied the father; and so the discussion ended.

That same afternoon, Jack made his appearance at the castle, nominally to see his sister, though Harry had her own opinion upon the subject. She happened to be alone in the drawing-room when he arrived, and she received him with a frank smile, and a blush that made her look softer, and more girlish than usual.

"Well," he began, "so I hear we are to have your sister with us while you are away. You start to-morrow, don't you?"

"Yes, but—but I think Julia is going to Drum."

"To Drum!" repeated the young man in surprise, for Constance had asked her mother to receive Julia before the latter's return from Dinachny, and the matter was supposed to have been settled.

"Yes, she has asked Mrs M'Mickie to take her in while we are away," said Harry, colouring, for she felt that Julia's conduct was rather uncourteous to Mrs de Vere.

"Oh, indeed!" said Jack. "I fancied

it was quite settled she was to come to us."

"I don't know anything about it, I'm sure," cried Harry impatiently. "Anyway, I don't suppose Mrs de Vere will regret her much?"

To this Jack returned no reply, for, to tell the truth, his mother and Pearl had been loudly lamenting Julia's threatened visit. He was in love with Harry, and viewed her with prejudiced eyes; but Julia had not been particularly civil to him at Dinachny, and he had heard that she was unpleasant to Constance. So altogether he was not disposed to like her much.

When Constance came into the room and saw the two young people talking so earnestly, she instantly divined how it was with them; a momentary feeling of jealousy assailed her, to see her pet brother thus devoting himself to a girl whom he knew had made her—his sister—so miserable. He had been told all about Harry's conduct, and yet he had chosen to fall in love with her! But after the first moment Constance put the petty, jealous feeling from her, and began to consider how she could best keep the young people apart. It would be a poor marriage for Harry; and it would be dangerous for Jack to stake his affections on a proud, insolent-tempered girl like Harry, who was so far above his reach.

Constance had always seen Harry at her worst, and found it difficult to credit her with the good qualities which she really possessed. To her it seemed quite possible that the girl was leading Jack on in order to throw him over with cutting contempt by-and-by. And she resolved to save him, if any words of hers could do so.

CHAPTER V.

THE TELL-TALE PHOTOGRAPH.

IF it had been a relief to Constance when her step-daughters left the castle, it was a yet greater relief to her when they returned to it, for she had begun to find her solitary life with Bruce well-nigh unendurable. It was not that he reproached her, or showed by his manner that he was displeased with her; he was uniformly kind to her, but she could not help fancying that he knew all, and this idea made her feel miserably constrained when in his presence. Surely Mrs Dean must have opened his eyes long ere this; and yet there were times when Constance half fancied he knew nothing. The doubt and uncertainty were wearing her out, and making her almost ill, and she hailed the girls' return with secret joy.

It was on the day following their return that she and Bruce and Harry left home, and on the same day Julia went to take up her abode at Drum. She went prepared to captivate Mrs M'Mickie by her sweetness. But the perverse old lady declined to be captivated, and seemed bent upon wearing out the girl's patience, and provoking her to an open rebellion. The more Julia yielded to her whims, the more exacting she became; and at last she crowned her persecution by insisting on the girl's going to call with her at Dinachny, in an old poke bonnet, such as she had worn in her own girlhood, and which was decidedly the worse for wear.

"I'm not going to take you about with me, with *that* fly-away thing on the back of your head," she said, grimly.

"I've got a broad-brimmed one," suggested Julia meekly.

"Broad-brimmed humbug!" replied the amiable M'Mickie. "Come, you are a sensible girl, go and put on this old hat of mine. It used to suit me well when I was young, and I've had sad work hunting it out for you."

"Oh, indeed, I could not wear a hat like that," pleaded poor Julia abjectly.

"And why not, pray? If I wore it, why shouldn't *you*, my dear? Come, do as I tell

you. I thought you were more sensible than your step-mother. She's the only one who ever lived in my house who declined to dress as I told 'em."

"I don't suppose *you* ever asked *her* to wear a hat like that," said Julia, almost in tears.

"Well, no; because I knew it would be no use if I did. But *you* are so much more obliging, my dear."

But in spite of the "my dear," Julia was well aware that the horrid old woman preferred Constance to herself. What was she to do? She would be sure to see a lot of people at Dinachny, and to wear such a frump of a hat before them would be the death of her. What was she to do?

"I think I would rather stay at home, please," she said, meekly.

"Indeed you'll do nothing of the kind," returned Mrs M'Mickie decidedly. "Now go and get ready, for the carriage will be round in five minutes."

Julia took up the objectionable "poke," and retired upstairs to her own room. She had already been over a week at Drum, but to-day she decided that she could not possibly stay out the fortnight. She had only brought a small portmanteau to Drum with her, and she now proceeded hastily to pack it.

She kept the carriage waiting five minutes, and when at length she appeared, she wore her own hat, not the "poke." Mrs M'Mickie glared at her in silence, and then stalked out to the carriage, without vouchsafing any remark.

"La! my dear, you *have* vexed her, to be sure," whispered Miss Trotter; but Julia was now desperate, and felt that she must rebel at any cost. Perhaps this was what Mrs M'Mickie had all along wished to drive her to, for though she maintained a grim silence during the entire drive, and sat with her black, beady eyes fixed immovably on the coachman's back, there was now and then a gleam of something very like malicious amusement on her face.

On entering the hall at Dinachny, they encountered Mrs de Vere, Pearl, and Jack. Lady de Vere wanted Pearl to help her with the preparations for the ball which was to take place in a week; and though Sir Charles was furious with the whole family, because Frank had helped to lose Josh his election, my lady had quietly insisted on having her own way with regard to Pearl. So to-day Pearl had come, accompanied by her brother and mother, her modest trunk having been sent on before, in one of Sir Charles's farm carts.

Mrs M'Mickie greeted the De Veres with a sniff and a nod, and then marched on towards

the drawing-room, leaving the others to follow as they pleased.

"Oh, Mrs de Vere," whispered Julia entreatingly, "*do* be kind to me, and let me come to Dunfern Cottage. I am *miserable* with *her*," nodding towards Mrs M'Mickie's retreating figure.

Mrs de Vere thought this request rather cool, considering how the young lady had refused to come to her house only a week ago, and she replied rather coldly,—

"Constance was afraid you would not like being with your aunt, that was why she suggested sending you to me."

"But you will receive me now?" entreated Julia.

"Certainly, if Mrs M'Mickie will let you come," said Mrs de Vere coldly, and then they reached the drawing-room door, and no more could be said.

Lady de Vere rose heavily from her arm-chair to shake hands with her sister-in-law and kiss Pearl.

"I shall want you to do an awful lot of things for me, my love," she said, lazily, to the latter. "Ah! Julia, how do you do? I wish you would come and help me too, my dear."

"I should like to very much, dear Lady de Vere, said Julia eagerly.

Lady de Vere had spoken idly, never expecting the girl to take her at her word; but she liked Julia, and being eminently good-natured, replied,—

"Well, my dear, I shall be very happy to have you."

"I am sure Aunt M'Mickie won't mind; will you, aunt?" said Julia timidly.

It would be delightful, she reflected, to be at Dinachny at the time of the ball, for then, of course, she would appear at it. Her own people were not to return to Moncrieffe till the day before the ball, and surely she could manage to stay at Dinachny over the party.

"Hum! it strikes me it doesn't much matter whether I mind or not," sniffed Mrs M'Mickie, while Mrs de Vere and Jack felt highly indignant at the cool manner in which Julia had thrown them over again; and Pearl flushed with vexation to think of having this horrid Moncrieffe girl in the house with herself.

Julia did not venture to say a word of apology to Mrs de Vere, for she was afraid of letting her aunt know that she had asked that lady to receive her. Lady de Vere's offer had been made in Mrs M'Mickie's presence, and was therefore more easily accepted.

"I have such a lot of people coming to me for this ball," sighed Lady de Vere. "And

one has to see that the arrangements are properly made, for servants and work-people are *so* stupid, especially in this country. And I hate writing notes; so you will have a good deal to do, Pearl. By-the-bye, your old friend, Sir Eldred Glendower, is to be here this evening, Julia."

"I don't think he's any particular friend of Julia's," remarked Mrs M'Mickie. "Sir Eldred didn't pay you sufficient attention, did he, my dear?"

Julia reddened as she replied,—

"Pearl tried to cultivate him more than I did."

It was an unkind shot, and as Jack saw the distressed flush on his little sister's face, he felt inclined to box Julia's ears. But Mrs M'Mickie turned the conversation abruptly by remarking.—

"Fanny is coming to me to-night."

"Fanny?" asked Lady de Vere. "Do you mean—"

"Your sister-in-law, Mrs Greville, to be sure; who else should I mean?" asked the old lady tersely. "She's coming by the same train as Eldred."

Everyone looked surprised, for, as usual, Mrs M'Mickie had said nothing about her expected guest's coming until the eleventh hour.

"I haven't sent to meet her," continued the old lady, with a chuckle. "I didn't invite her; she said she was coming to Drum without asking *me*. So she may come up from the station the best way she can. She can easily get a fly or something."

"Dear me, how strange," observed Lady de Vere.

"Strange that anyone should wish to stay with *me?* I know you think me a disagreeable old woman, Lady de Vere; but, you see, some people think otherwise."

"Indeed, Mrs M'Mickie, I never said—"

"But you did!" interrupted the other, with a snort.

"I have no doubt Fanny will enjoy herself very much at Drum."

"No, she won't."

Lady de Vere opened her blue eyes in mild astonishment; then, turning to Mrs de Vere, she observed,—

"I suppose Fanny will want to come to our ball—"

"She won't come from *my* house," said Mrs M'Mickie, as she rose to take her departure.

"Won't you stay for some tea?" asked her ladyship, though not in any very urgent tone, it must be confessed.

"It is useless for me to expect rational

converse in a house where everyone's mind is occupied with *balls*," said the old lady, ignoring her hostess's offer.

"Dear me, what a very discomposing person!" sighed my lady, as the door closed on Mrs M'Mickie and Miss Trotter. "She positively wouldn't let me be civil to her!"

"Oh, I have been so miserable with her!" cried Julia, who had remained firmly seated on her sofa when Mrs M'Mickie rose to depart.

"I daresay," acquiesced my lady indifferently.

"I left my box all ready packed at Drum, for I felt I could not remain with her another day. Could it be sent for, do you think, dear Lady de Vere?"

"Oh, certainly!" replied the lady graciously.

She was rather surprised by the way in which Miss Julia had thrown herself upon her hands, but she hardly knew what else to say. But although she was good-natured, she was also indolent and forgetful, and she allowed Julia to sit for an hour and a-half on her sofa before she thought of ordering a room to be prepared for her. Then it was almost time to dress for dinner, and no orders had been given about sending for Julia's portmanteau.

There were several people in the house, and Julia felt ready to cry with vexation at the prospect of appearing at dinner in her morning dress. She did venture to speak to Lady de Vere again about her portmanteau; but the latter looked slightly annoyed, and replied that it should be sent for to-morrow morning.

"My maid will give you anything you require to-night," added her ladyship carelessly; and Julia could say no more.

At last, in despair, she betook herself to Pearl's room, and found the girl ready dressed for dinner in a pretty white dress which Constance had given her. She looked so sweet and pretty, that Julia felt a keen pang of jealousy.

"Oh, Pearl, what shall I do?" she cried, piteously. "Lady de Vere wouldn't send for my box to-night, and I have nothing to wear for dinner. Haven't you something you could lend me to make me look a little bit decent?"

For a moment Pearl hesitated; for, in the first place, she had very few "pretty things" in her possession, and in the second, she disliked Julia, and would rather have lent them to anyone but her. But she was a sweet-natured girl, and Julia's trouble was one with which she could so heartily sympathise; for

had not she often suffered unhappiness about her own dress?

"I am afraid my dresses would hardly fit you," she said; "and besides, there is no time for you to change. But perhaps these may look nice," and as she spoke, she held up a set of pretty lace collarette and cuffs over Julia's black dress—Julia had always worn black at Drum, since Mrs M'Mickie objected to colours.

"I suppose they'll have to do," said Julia ungraciously. "Anyway, they are better than nothing."

Pearl felt this to be particularly ungracious, for the lace set had been a present from her mother just before she came to Dinachny, and she felt it a sacrifice to allow anyone else to take the first wear out of them. However she was sweet tempered, and replied, pleasantly,—

"I daresay they would look nicer with some flowers. If you will pin them on I will go and see if I can find any."

She darted out of the room as she spoke, and Julia, instead of pinning on the lace, applied herself to examining Pearl's various belongings, which lay scattered about, just as their owner had first unpacked them. They were not a very imposing assortment, and Julia turned them over rather con-

temptuously. There was a very pretty little bonnet, however, and Julia turned this over as enviously as though she had not possessed plenty of hats of her own. She tried it on her head and it suited her to perfection, and then she gave it a vicious twist and laid it back where she had found it. When Pearl put it on next day she was much dismayed to find it quite out of shape. Her deft fingers soon repaired the damage, however, and she concluded that she must have packed it carelessly, and resolved to be more careful for the future.

Julia's attention was next attracted by a piece of cardboard sticking from between the leaves of a Bible. Fancy taking one's Bible about with one! she thought, contemptuously. The cardboard looked uncommonly like a photograph, and pulling it out, Julia recognised it as one which had been taken of Sir Eldred by a strolling artist, when he was staying at Moncrieffe Castle. The photo had been pronounced so bad that Sir Eldred had torn it in two and flung it ignominiously into the empty drawing-room grate.

Julia remembered now that Pearl had been in the room at the time—no doubt she had surreptitiously picked it out of the grate afterwards and kept it. Then she must be in love with Sir Eldred! At anyrate every-

one who saw this photo would believe her to be so.

Julia heard a light step outside, and had just time to slip the photo into her pocket, when Pearl entered with a bunch of lovely pink moss rosebuds and ferns in her hand.

"Haven't you got the lace on yet?" she said, in some surprise, seeing that Julia was still busy arranging the collarette.

"There, I'm ready," said Julia, with heightened colour.

"Let me put in the flowers," said Pearl, and she proceeded nimbly to arrange the rosebuds in Julia's hair and breast.

"There, you look quite nice now!" she cried, with some pride, as she surveyed her labours.

"I'll have to do, anyway," was the somewhat chilling response. "Shall we go down to the drawing-room now?"

CHAPTER VI.

SPITE.

WHEN the two girls entered the drawing-room they found everyone else already assembled. Among the party was Sir Eldred, who came forward and shook hands pleasantly with them.

He noticed the bright flush of pleasure which rose to Pearl's face as she greeted him (Julia noticed it too), and thought of what Constance had said to him about her sister. Yes, certainly he had better be careful, so he turned away and talked to the only other young lady (besides Julia) in the house, who, with her father and mother, constituted the rest of the party. He would far rather have talked to Pearl; but Constance had begged

him not to be too kind to the child, so he turned away from her after saying a few kind words, and talked to Miss Westcott, though as he did so he contrived to notice that Pearl was looking pale and delicate, now that the transient flush had faded from her cheeks.

When dinner was announced it fell to Sir Eldred's lot to take Julia in. Pearl had to follow the others alone; and she could not help reflecting rather jealously that, if Julia had not thrust herself into the house, Sir Eldred would probably have been her own partner.

At table, however, she chanced to be placed next to Sir Eldred, and her happiness was soon restored, for he did not like Julia, and could never get on with her, so devoted himself exclusively to her—Pearl. No one could have called her pale or delicate-looking now; there was a brightness in her eyes, and a soft colour on her cheeks, which made her prettier than ever. Sir Eldred certainly thought her very pretty.

She was a sweet little thing—a dear little thing, he reflected; and he almost forgot Constance's warning as he talked to her. And certainly the suspicion that she was disposed to like himself, did not lessen his liking for her.

But after dinner, in the drawing-room, things arranged themselves differently. Sir Eldred talked to Josh, till the latter fell asleep, and then placed himself beside Lady de Vere. Pearl was far too feverish and uneasy to talk to Miss Westcott (who was rather an insipid young lady), and so sat in the background all the evening, pretending to work, and feeling utterly forlorn and wretched. She had looked forward so eagerly to this week at Dinachny, and now Sir Eldred hardly seemed to have a word to say to her.

In truth, Sir Eldred would far rather have talked to her than to anyone else in the room, and was exercising considerable self-denial in thus keeping away from her; but she did not know this, and felt unutterably wretched as she sat by herself, unnoticed by anyone.

When she went upstairs to bed, the first thing she did was to look for Sir Eldred's mutilated photograph. Ever since her return home, after her visit to Moncrieffe Castle, this photo had been her greatest treasure. She had hidden it carefully where neither her mother nor anyone else could see it, and each night she had taken it out and contemplated

it lovingly. To-night she was very sore at heart, but all the same she wished to go through her little ceremony of devotion before her cardboard idol. She looked for it in her Bible, but not finding it sought it anxiously among her other possessions. All in vain! the little picture was nowhere to be found. Pearl was in despair, and she hoped intensely that she had not left it somewhere about her room at home, where her mother would find it. Hitherto she had never had a secret from her mother; but this was different. How could she tell *any* one how much she cared for Sir Eldred? Indeed she hardly ventured to confess it to herself. She was terrified lest anyone should discover the photo among her possessions, besides which the loss of it was very dreadful to her—she would almost rather have lost the pretty coral set which Bruce and Constance had brought her from Italy.

Silly little fool! smiles the sedate reader; and indeed one can hardly forbear smiling too. Yet these griefs of youth are very dreadful to bear, however absurd they may seem to older and harder hearts.

Pearl was about as miserable as it is

possible for any human being to be, to-night; and when she realised at last that the photo was lost, she sat down and wept bitterly—not only over its loss, but over all the mingled unhappiness and excitement of the evening.

The following morning, Sunday, she came down to breakfast looking very pale, and with dark circles under her eyes. Had she suspected that her photo was at the present minute reposing in Julia's pocket, her manner would hardly have been so apathetic and spiritless; but though she certainly fancied that she had seen it half-protruding from her Bible yesterday, it never occurred to her that Julia could have taken possession of it. To take a photograph belonging to another person, seemed to her as grave a crime as stealing a piece of jewellery; and it never entered her head to suspect Julia. So she greeted her quite sweetly when she met her in the breakfast-room, though she was certainly discomposed by the way in which the other stared at her, being painfully conscious that her last night's crying had not improved her looks.

Sir Eldred had not made his appearance when she come down, but presently he came

in, when breakfast was half over, and merely nodded to the company in general as he took his seat after shaking hands with his hostess.

"I won't interrupt you in the enjoyment of your repast, ladies and gentlemen, by shaking hands," he drawled, as he took the only vacant seat, between Miss Westcott and Josh, and opposite to Pearl.

He smiled kindly as he met her eyes, and then applied himself to his breakfast, to make up for lost time.

"Have you all done breakfast?" he said, cheerily. "Then pray don't wait for me—I particularly object to being watched while I feed—it makes me feel shy, you know. Besides, I am hungry this morning, and I warn you I shall keep you a long time if you do wait."

"Well, Pearl will stay and pour out your second cup," said Lady de Vere, rising. "I want to write a note before we go to church."

So Pearl took her aunt's seat, and was left alone with Sir Eldred.

"How funny of Aunt Fanny to go to Drum," she observed, after a few minutes of silence.

"Yes, I warned her she wouldn't find it

exactly a terrestrial Paradise; but she's only to be there a week. She is paying several visits about Scotland, you know, and wanted to put up somewhere for a week."

"I think she might have found some place a little pleasanter than Drum."

"Oh, she fancies the old lady likes her, you know. She was in an awful way because no carriage was sent to meet her—doesn't like paying her own fare, you know. So I took her up in the dog-cart they had sent for me—it was very little out of the way—and tipped the carter to take her traps as well as mine. No, thanks, no more tea—I've finished my repast at last."

Such was the conversation between the two young people over the breakfast table, and although Sir Eldred's tone was as pleasant as usual, there was something in his manner that hurt Pearl. It was not what it used to be—some change seemed to have come over him since those happy days at Moncrieffe Castle.

It was arranged that Pearl was to walk to church with the gentlemen, as the carriage was filled by Lady de Vere, Mrs and Miss Westcott, and Julia; but again Sir Eldred chose to walk on ahead with Sir Charles and

Mr Westcott, and Pearl was left to follow with Josh. She had fancied that surely now that there were no other ladies to claim his attention, Sir Eldred would walk beside her; and her disappointment was bitter. Very little conversation passed between her and her cousin, and it is to be feared that she paid but slight attention to Mr Macdougal's eloquent discourse. The Drum pew was opposite the Dinachny one, but as Mrs M'Mickie always marched out of church the instant the blessing had been given, Mrs Greville, who was with her, had no opportunity of speaking to any of her relations, who all waited till the first crush was over, before leaving their pews.

It was two miles and a-half from the kirk to Dinachny, and by the time Pearl reached the lodge gates, she was very tired. They had returned in the same order as they went, and she was doubly tired because she was so dispirited. On entering the gates, Josh suddenly turned off and disappeared down a side path, leaving Pearl to make the best of her way to the house by herself. She trudged wearily on up the steep drive, and presently Sir Eldred glanced back and saw her left all

alone, and what could he do but turn and join her?

"How tired you look!" he exclaimed, as he came back to her.

"Yes, I am not accustomed to take such long walks," she replied, wearily.

"Why did you come?"

"Oh, Aunt Louie would have been vexed if I had refused to walk—it would have looked as if I wanted to go in the carriage."

Sir Eldred attempted several other observations, but Pearl made very feeble responses, and it was evident she was too tired to talk much. All the rest of that day she kept out of Sir Eldred's way, and he found the companionship of the other young ladies, and of the three men, rather insipid. On Monday and Tuesday it was the same; Pearl was always out of the way when Sir Eldred came in from shooting, and he began to grow very weary of the rest of the party. The ball was to be on Friday, and he reflected with satisfaction that some other people were coming to stay in the house for it on Thursday.

On Wednesday afternoon Lady de Vere drove over with Pearl to call on Mrs Greville. There was not much love lost between the

two sisters-in-law—at least Lady de Vere was not very fond of Mrs Greville, though the latter always tried to be friendly with her—for obvious reasons, Dinachny being a pleasant house to stay in. Consequently my lady had been in no hurry to welcome her sister-in-law, and she felt it rather a bore having to call on her now. At the Drum gate, however, they encountered Mrs M'Mickie, who was returning from an inspection of her farm, in a short skirt which displayed her ankles and strong boots, and with a most remarkable hat tied over her head.

"Mrs Greville isn't here," said the old lady briefly, in reply to Lady de Vere's inquiries.

"Not here! Has she left the country?"

"I know nothing about her. She left me on Monday morning for Dunfern cottage."

"Ah! then probably she will be there."

"Possibly."

No more could be got out of Mrs M'Mickie, so Lady de Vere ordered the coachman to drive to Dunfern Cottage, since Mrs M'Mickie apparently had no intention of inviting them into her house. But on reaching Dunfern, Mrs de Vere informed them that Mrs Greville and Jack had gone over to Dinachny.

"That is just like Fanny," observed Lady de Vere, with placid offence. "The idea of coming to see me before I had called on *her!*"

So back they drove to Dinachny, and Lady de Vere remarked that of course Fanny would expect to be driven home again, as she could never walk both ways.

"She *is* so cool," added her ladyship.

She would have thought Mrs Greville still more cool could she have known that she had hailed an empty dog-cart of Sir Charles's, which she had seen passing on the road, and ordered the driver to take her to Dinachny.

On reaching home, Lady de Vere found her sister-in-law comfortably ensconced in the drawing-room, flirting with Sir Eldred.

"Ah! I knew you would be back soon!" cried the widow, springing skittishly out of her chair as her ladyship entered. "I really thought you didn't intend to come to see me, so I came to see you instead."

In truth she was determined to get an invitation to the ball, and Lady de Vere quite understood this.

"I went to see you at Drum," she said,

sinking into a chair, and bidding Pearl carry her bonnet upstairs.

"Ah! that was the most awful visit I ever paid in my life!" cried Mrs Greville, with effusion. "Just fancy, the very first evening I was there, that awful old woman asked me to pay her a paltry shilling she paid for my entrance to the Royal Academy last spring. I declare I had quite forgotten it; but she pounced upon me for it before I had finished shaking hands with her."

"I was sure you could never stay with her, when I heard you had gone there," said Julia, with quiet triumph. "I am always considered sweet tempered, but even I could not put up with her."

"No, indeed, who could? The old woman was quite rude to me about my dress on Sunday, and I'm sure I was very quietly dressed. After we came out of church she attacked me for not giving anything to the collection. I of course supposed it would take place after the service, but it appears the people all put their money in the plate as they go in, and when we came out it was removed. But Mrs M'Mickie would have it that I had been in a Scotch church before—"

"So you have," struck in Julia softly.

"Well, at anyrate I had forgotten how they made their collection."

"They think the congregation is more likely to be in a good humour before than after the sermon," said Jack.

"Not a bad idea, 'pon my word," said Sir Eldred, stroking his moustache slowly. "They have uncommon long sermons here, and I never give anything when I've been bored for an unconscionable time. I went to hear a swell preacher give a charity sermon once in London; by the end of a quarter-of-an-hour I was so moved by his eloquence I determined to give half-a-crown; after five-and-twenty minutes I vowed I'd only give two shillings; at the half-hour I came down to one shilling; five-and-thirty minutes, sixpence; and by the end of the sermon, which lasted forty minutes altogether, I jumped up and went out of church without giving anything."

"Oh! you shocking, wicked creature!" cried Mrs Greville, striking the baronet playfully on the arm with her parasol. "It is really *shocking* of you to talk in that way."

Pearl, who had re-entered the room after taking her aunt's bonnet upstairs, thought

Mrs Greville's manner insufferable; how *could* Sir Eldred look amused by it?

"Well, I think going to church is a great mistake altogether, you know," began Sir Eldred, bent upon calling forth fresh gestures of horror from Mrs Greville, but as he spoke he caught Pearl's eyes fixed upon him with an expression of pained wonder, and he hastily corrected himself, and added,—"At least, to the Scotch Church. I can't say I like it. Of course, the English is different."

The young man was touched by the look in the girl's eyes; it had not been shocked so much as *pained*, and he felt that she would not have looked like that had any of the others made the same remark.

"Well, no more do I," agreed Lady de Vere; "but what can one do when there is no other church to go to?"

"Stay at home," suggested Jack.

"Dear me," sighed Mrs Greville, "how old it makes me feel to have such a big nephew!"

"And how young it must make Jack feel to have such a lively young aunt!" said Sir Eldred, with gravity.

"Oh, fie! you are always saying those sort

of ridiculous things, Eldred!" cried Mrs Greville, and Pearl disliked her more than ever.

"I was never more serious in my life," he protested, gravely.

"And Pearl, my dear, how strange it seems to find you a grown-up young lady! The last time I saw you, you were a small child in short frocks. I suppose you don't remember?"

"No," replied Pearl indifferently.

"You aren't looking well now, my dear," added Mrs Greville, tapping the girl good-naturedly on the cheek. "Your mother said you were not very strong."

"Oh, I'm quite well!" replied Pearl hastily.

"No, you're not," struck in Jack. "You've been looking awfully seedy lately."

"She must be in love, surely!" laughed Mrs Greville; and Pearl could not help colouring a little.

"Oh, Sir Eldred," cried Julia, "do you remember having your photograph taken at Moncrieffe this summer?"

"I do. I have not got over the shock to my feelings yet. I had no idea before how hideous I could look!"

Pearl had grown suddenly ashy white; but no one observed this save Julia and Sir Eldred, the latter of whom was considerably surprised by her change of colour.

"I discovered the other day that the poor, discarded photo had been carefully preserved, however," laughed Julia.

"Indeed! No one could care for it unless they were tremendously fond of me, I should say."

"Well—perhaps you flatter yourself—eh, Pearl?"

"Pearl?" echoed Sir Eldred; and then as he glanced at Pearl's crimson face, he suddenly divined the whole state of the case.

"Yes, I found this among Pearl's things by accident," said Julia, drawing the photo from her pocket, and tossing it into Pearl's lap. "I saw it sticking out of her Bible—ha! ha! ha! Really, Pearl, I think you might have found a better photographic album."

Sir Eldred rose and stood beside the window, with his hands in his pockets, whistling *sotto voce* to himself, and trying to look unconcerned. He would dearly have liked to strangle Julia at that moment, but he would not let her see how she had disturbed him. As for Pearl,

she sat with the photo lying on her lap, and her burning face bent down, unable to move or speak. She was too young, and had too little knowledge of the world to be able to parry Julia's thrust, as a more experienced person might have done. Her cheeks were tingling, and there was a mist before her eyes, and a singing in her ears, and she could not have uttered a word to save her life. To her it seemed that her heart's secret had been laid bare to everyone, and her one longing was to rush away somewhere where she would see no one again.

Lady de Vere and Mrs Greville were both too good-natured and too well-bred to appear to notice her discomfort, and went on talking upon indifferent matters, as if nothing were amiss.

Lady de Vere asked Mrs Greville to stay and dine with her, but she did not include Jack in the invitation, for she knew Sir Charles was still greatly offended with all the Dunfern party, on account of Frank's luckless speech. Pearl was of use to herself, and being a girl, was not supposed to understand so much about politics; but Jack was known to be a Conservative, like the rest

of his family, and so Lady de Vere thought it advisable not to include him in her invitation.

He rose when she mentioned the subject to Mrs Greville, for he quite understood that he would not be a welcome guest, and took his departure.

Pearl wished devoutly that she could have accompanied him home; but his departure made a little stir, under cover of which she managed to slip quietly out of the room. She went upstairs to her own, where she remained until it was time to descend to the drawing-room, and then she crept down, feeling as if she could never look anyone in the face again.

She was much younger in mind than either Harry or Julia Moncrieffe, although their senior in age, and she felt her present mortification far more keenly than either of them would have done. She did not see that if she herself made light of the matter of the photograph, no one else would probably think much about it — she was too ignorant and unsophisticated for this. To her it seemed that she had been disgraced, and held up to public contempt and ridicule; and she felt as if her agony of mind would almost kill her.

On regaining her own room, her first impulse had been to destroy the photo, the cause of her present misery, and for this purpose she had struck a match, and set light to the cardboard. But before it was half consumed, she had extinguished the hastily kindled flame, and opening her desk, she laid the charred remains of the picture in a small private drawer, and then carefully relocked the desk.

All that evening she was in tortures, fearing lest Julia should broach the subject of the photo again; but Miss Julia was quite satisfied with her afternoon's work, and suffered the subject to rest.

At dinner, however, Josh nearly referred to the subject, though his mother had specially cautioned him against doing so. He had been in the drawing-room when Julia produced the photo, and the event had made a considerable impression on his mind—chiefly because he could not quite understand it.

"I say, what's the matter with Pearl?" he had asked, after she had left the room; and when he found himself alone with his mother in the drawing-room, he had again reverted to the subject.

"Oh, of course she didn't like Sir Eldred's photo to be found among her things, and it was excessively horrid of Julia to say anything about it," replied my lady. "But *whatever* you do, Josh, mind you don't speak about it to anyone—especially to Pearl."

But several times at dinner Josh was perilously near the subject, and his mother was in an agony, and managed once to give him a touch with her foot under the table, to remind him of her warning.

"I say, you needn't kick me," said Josh sulkily. "I'm not going to speak of it."

My lady coloured, and everyone stared, but fortunately Pearl, the chief person concerned, did not seem to understand the drift of Josh's remark. Indeed, she was far too intent upon watching Mrs Greville flirting with Sir Eldred, to have any attention to spare for her cousin. Mrs Greville had taken complete possession of the baronet, and he was not sorry to have her to stand between himself and Pearl. He was far from understanding what agonies of jealousy the girl was enduring, as she watched the familiar badinage which passed between him and her aunt; but he was sincerely sorry for her, when he saw how white and wretched she

was looking. She herself had no idea how woebegone she really looked, and when she went up to her own room that night, and caught sight of her little, white, miserable face in her glass, she was horrified to think how visible her unhappiness must have been to everyone. And worst of all, Sir Eldred must have seen it too! All the evening he had avoided her, and flirted with Mrs Greville (whom, by the way, Pearl cordially detested), and Pearl fancied that he must despise her in his heart, or at the best laugh at her as a stupid little fool.

She spent the greater part of that night in tears, and the following morning she looked so ill and wretched, that Sir Eldred felt himself a brute—though, after all, what had *he* done to her? Nothing, he assured himself; and yet he felt that he ought to have been more careful. She was not like other girls of her age; she was more innocent, and simple-minded, and he had forgotten this, and flirted with her much as he might have done with a London young lady. The latter would have understood him at once, but poor little Pearl had altogether failed to do so.

Sir Eldred longed to be kind to her, and to

make friends with her again, but how was he to do so? She shrank from him visibly, and seemed determined to avoid his presence as much as possible, and he hardly knew how to approach her.

"I will go and ask Constance," he thought to himself. This was Thursday; the Moncrieffes were to return home to-night, and Sir Eldred resolved to go over and see them to-morrow morning.

CHAPTER VII.

CONSTANCE VINDICATES HERSELF.

HARRY was very glad to get home again. She had enjoyed her visits pretty well on the whole, but still it was with considerable pleasure that she again found herself at Moncrieffe. She was on better terms with her step-mother just now than she had ever been since her father's marriage.

Constance had been very good-natured to her in one or two trifling matters lately, and Harry was more won by the kind way in which her step-mother had laced up her dress, one night when their maid happened to be ill, than she would have been by some greater sacrifice. Then too, they had been staying

in the house with some very fast young married women, and Harry could not help admiring Constance's conduct as compared to theirs. In London she had ascribed her step-mother's quiet manner to cunning, but now she was more disposed to do her justice. It is difficult to go on hating a really amiable person for ever, and Harry was half disposed to forgive her step-mother. But she was far from being wholly won yet; at present there was a truce between them, but peace could hardly be said to have been signed, for Harry was still suspicious, and watched Constance critically before laying down her arms. The great question in her mind was: would Constance try to poison Jack's mind against her? Harry was painfully conscious that she had not behaved very well to any of the De Vere family. They must all dislike her, and Jack must be vexed with her if he believed all they could tell him about her. But this consciousness had only the effect of rousing her defiant spirit. She knew that she would be wise to propitiate Jack's people, if she really cared to win him; but she was far too proud and wilful for this. She felt that she could never stoop to seek favour with people whom

she had always hitherto slighted, however much might depend upon her doing so. And would she not be condescending sufficiently in giving young De Vere any encouragement at all? He was poor, and she was rich, so why should she trouble herself about his mother and sisters, provided she made herself agreeable to him? Yet she disliked the De Veres all the more, because she felt that they had some just cause of complaint against her. She did not dislike Constance herself quite so much as she used to; but her animosity to the rest of the De Veres continued unabated.

She wondered whether Jack would come and see her on this first day of her return. As she did not reach the castle till late in the afternoon, she felt that she could hardly expect him to do so: yet all the same she was half disappointed when he failed to appear. The next day she felt certain he would come; but he did not, and she began to grow resentful and indignant. Why did he not come? Were his mother and Pearl keeping him away? She could not lay the blame on her stepmother this time, but unfortunately a fresh cause of dispute arose between them on this day.

In the morning Harry received a letter from Carry Day, saying that she and Netta and Edgar would come up to Moncrieffe the following afternoon, as Edgar wished to bid her good-bye before returning to England, which he was just about to do. She and Netta were to remain another three weeks at their present abode, she added, and it was this latter piece of information which roused the flame of war afresh between the step-mother and daughter. The Moncrieffes were to give a ball themselves in a couple of weeks; and now that Harry heard her friends were still to be in Dunkillie at the time it was to take place, she insisted loudly that they should be invited to it. Of course Constance objected, and hence arose a fresh quarrel. The feud was not as deadly as it had been on many former occasions; Harry did not say such impertinent things to her step-mother as she often did, nor was her tone so uncompromising; but still she was very angry. She was a loyal friend just as she was a bitter enemy; and it seemed so *mean*, to her honest young mind, to slight old acquaintances because they did not happen to be well up in the world. She saw that Netta Day was not quite "the thing," and she could

not bring herself to like Mr Edgar very much; but she was really fond of Carry (at least, as girls count fondness), and she could not bear to have her slighted. She had fancied that the Days would be away at the time of the ball, and now she was sincerely sorry to find that they would not. But since they were to be in the neighbourhood, they must be invited; there could be no doubt about that. But she found both Constance and her father obdurate, and her indignation was great.

"I know quite well why you dislike Carry so much," she said, to her step-mother. "You hid yourself in the back drawing-room, and listened to all she said about you, that first day you came to grandpapa's house. Of course you have had a spite against her ever since."

"Harry, do you really think me capable of playing the spy like that?"

"Well, you *were* in the back room," retorted Harry, half-hesitatingly, yet defiantly.

"I came in while you were talking, and for a minute did not understand of whom Miss Day was speaking. As soon as I did, I left the room softly, thinking that it would be

awkward and disagreeable for all of us if she discovered me."

Harry could not refuse to believe this explanation, so simply and truthfully given; and for a minute she remained silent, not knowing how to acknowledge herself in the wrong.

"Of course I could not like Miss Day after the way I heard her speak of me to you," proceeded Constance, after a brief pause. "No one but an utterly unprincipled person could have deliberately sought to make mischief between us, as she seemed to be doing. I had done nothing to injure her, and yet she was using her influence over you to sow my married life with trouble. Of course you disliked having a step-mother—any girl of your age would do so; but you are not naturally ungenerous, and if mischief had not been made between us from the first—first by Miss Day and then by Julia—I might have won you to be my friend. As it is, you have rejected all my overtures of peace, and have done your best to make my whole life wretched," and, overcome by excitement, Constance burst into tears.

This was such a very peculiar proceeding

for her usually self-possessed step-mother, that Harry was too bewildered to move or speak. She saw that Constance was speaking her feelings honestly and sincerely. There could be no acting here, and her emotion was evidently sincere.

"Please don't cry," she said, rather uneasily. "I know I've got an awful temper, but I can't bear the Days to think I look down on them, or wish to slight them."

But Constance quickly recovered her self-control, and ended the discussion by leaving the room, after assuring Harry that she had no power to make Bruce consent to let the Days be invited to his ball.

"You have far more influence with him than I have, and you know it," she added, in rather a sore tone. "If you cannot move him, how can *I*?"

It had never occurred to Harry before that Constance could be jealous of Moncrieffe's partiality for herself and Julia, and now it suddenly occurred to her that her father *did* seem to consider his daughters before his wife. At least he used to, though lately there had not been so much room for any display of favouritism. It was a new view of the case to Harry,

and she felt more disposed to sympathise with her step-mother.

As Constance opened the door, she found herself suddenly confronted by Mrs Greville and Jack; and Harry saw the latter's face flush and darken at sight of his sister's tear-stained cheeks.

"Oh, my dear, aren't you surprised to see me?" cried Mrs Greville, embracing her niece, and wisely ignoring the traces of emotion on her face.

"Indeed, I am," said Constance. "Bruce, Bruce"—as she heard her husband's step on the stair—"here is Aunt Fanny."

"Hullo! hullo!" said Moncrieffe, entering. "This is a surprise."

Mrs Greville took possession of Moncrieffe, and began giving him an account of her movements, and Constance turned to her brother, and begged him to remain to lunch.

"I'm afraid I can't, Con," replied the young fellow, who had been shaking hands rather constrainedly with Harry. "I did not mean to come up to-day, as I knew I should see you to-night at Dinachny; only, Aunt Fanny didn't like walking alone, and mother had a

little headache and couldn't come with her. I've promised to go fishing with young Lochmore, so I must be off."

Harry felt herself very hardly treated by chance. She had really not said anything particularly cross to Constance to-day, yet, of course, Jack would think she had, when he saw his sister's tearful eyes.

Constance was quite herself again now, but when Jack first entered, her eyes had been full of tears, and he had evidently seen them; but, in any case, he said he had not intended to call to-day, and Harry felt that this could not be regarded in the light of a visit. Of course, his people had been trying to set him against her during this last fortnight, when he had been removed from her influence; and apparently they had succeeded, since he had not rushed to see her as soon as she arrived. And now the sight of his sister in tears would naturally confirm him in his belief of all he had heard.

Assuredly, Fate had dealt hardly with Harry; for to-day she had *not* been rude to her step-mother, and her heart was more softened towards her than usual.

"And so Julia is at Dinachny again!" said

Moncrieffe, as Mrs Greville announced this fact. "I fancied she was at Drum."

"Oh, she stayed there over a week, and I'm sure I can't tell how ever she endured it so long. She left on Saturday, the very day I arrived. Mrs M'Mickie did not send to meet me at the station, and if it had not been for Eldred Glendower's kindness, I should have had to pay for a fly all the way up to Drum. And when I got there I could only stay one day. That old woman is quite too awful; it would have killed me to remain another day in her house. How on earth did you survive four whole weeks at Drum, Constance? I'm sure I pity you from the bottom of my heart; but, of course, you had Sir Eldred to support you. He can do anything he likes with that old woman."

Everyone coloured, for this was a sore point with Mr and Mrs Moncrieffe, and Harry and Jack both knew it to be so. Jack had heard from Pearl that Constance had been *obliged* to go to Drum to promote her step-daughters' interests, and he felt indignant on her account. Nor did Moncrieffe like to be reminded of that visit of his wife's to Drum. When he had urged her to go, he had had no conception of the

disagreeables of the M'Mickie *ménage;* and he had supposed that Constance would merely find herself rather dull with the old lady. But now he would have given a great deal to have been able to undo his wife's visit to Drum. If both Julia and Mrs Greville found a few days there too much for their endurance, what must Constance have undergone during her four weeks' visit? The whole thing was unendurable to him, now he thought of it, and that remark of Mrs Greville's about Sir Eldred was also very unpalatable to him. Blind fool that he had been!

Mrs Greville stayed to luncheon, and asked Constance incidentally if she could spare her a seat in her carriage that evening.

"Your mother isn't going to the ball," she said, "and it would be a serious expense for me to order a carriage all for myself."

Of course Constance assented, and agreed to call at Dunfern Cottage for her aunt; and Harry's heart beat rather faster than usual, when her father added that if they didn't take their footman, Jack could have a seat on the box.

A short time ago, Harry would have been highly indignant at having their plans thus

disturbed to suit the convenience of Constance's relations; but now she was keenly desirous that young De Vere should drive on her father's box. Certainly a change had come over the spirit of her dream.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BALL.

THAT afternoon, while Mrs Greville was still at the castle, Sir Eldred Glendower was announced. Mrs Greville was delighted to see him, and welcomed him so cordially that she hardly gave her niece an opportunity of saying a word. But the young man noticed that what little Mrs Moncrieffe did utter was cold and constrained, and he readily understood that she must be surprised at his visit, considering the way in which they had last parted. But he also noted the quick flush, succeeded by sudden paleness, with which she received him, and this prevented him feeling hurt by the coldness of her manner. Constance had never

expected to see him here again, and his sudden appearance had almost deprived her of her presence of mind for a moment. Why did he come? What did he mean by it? Was it possible that he could so far misunderstand her as to suppose for a moment that she could consent to receive him in the old friendly way, after—after what had passed between them?

Moncrieffe had left the two ladies to entertain each other in the drawing-room after lunch (Harry had gone out for a solitary ramble); but when he heard that his cousin was upstairs, he again made his appearance in the drawing-room, and though he did not talk much, and looked rather gloomy, he showed that he had no intention of quitting the field till the baronet had departed. Something in his aspect and manner made Constance uneasy. She saw that he was *watching* her, and in an instant she understood that Mrs Dean must really have told him all she knew, and probably a great deal more also. Probably she had done so at once, yet how carefully he had concealed anything he might have felt from his wife's eyes! Not once had he shown her that he doubted or suspected

her, and his manner to her had been invariably, if quietly, kind. Constance felt that she owed him some gratitude now, if hitherto she had considered herself the aggrieved party. Perhaps it was because he did not care for her that he behaved like this—and yet, was he not mounting guard over her now? Evidently he cared for her sufficiently to take care of her, now that it had occurred to him that she required taking care of; and, woman like, she was gratified by this, even while it alarmed her. She felt as if she scarcely dared to address Sir Eldred in her husband's presence, and as Moncrieffe did not talk much either, the conversation was carried on chiefly between Mrs Greville and the baronet.

The Moncrieffe carriage had been ordered to take Mrs Greville back to Dunfern Cottage at four o'clock, and when it was announced, and she rose to take her departure, Moncrieffe felt himself bound, in common politeness, to escort her downstairs, though by thus doing he left his wife and cousin alone together. As they left the room, Sir Eldred, who stood beside the door, closed it carefully, and then, turning to Constance, he began, hastily,—

"Constance, are you vexed with me for coming here to-day?"

"I am certainly surprised, Sir Eldred," she replied, coldly, and speaking slowly, to keep her voice steady.

"It is about your sister I wished to speak," he said, stung by her coldness, yet feeling that what he was about to say would be the surest way of softening her.

"About Pearl?" she asked, in rather a startled tone.

"Yes—Constance, how would you like to have me for your brother?"

When he was really her brother, she need never fear to meet him, he reflected, triumphantly.

For a minute Constance was silent, while the blood forsook her lips. Of course it was natural he should wish to marry; but why did he come to *her* with his love tale? Surely he might have found some other confidante? Mrs Greville, for instance, would be a far more likely person to take interest in a foolish love affair.

"If you and Pearl are satisfied, that is the principal thing," she replied, rather coldly, at last. Somehow she felt that of all the women

in the world her own sister was the very last whom she would have wished him to marry, and she could not throw any cordiality into her voice.

"I thought you would be pleased," he said, in a tone of bitter disappointment.

"I should like you to have a nice wife, and I am sure Pearl will make a sweet little wife to anyone who wins her. Have you spoken to my mother yet? She is the proper person to consult first—not me."

"I have not spoken to Pearl herself yet," replied the young man, in a deeply hurt tone. "I felt that I could not do so unless you approved—"

"What have *I* to do with it?"

"You have everything to do with it, and you know it quite well," he cried, forgetting himself in his mortification. "I believe that the child cares for me, dear little soul; but if you object, Constance, I cannot marry her."

"Ah!" said Constance, with a deep-drawn breath. How selfish she had been! How altogether horrible! Of course Pearl was the first person to be considered, and she had hardly given her a thought.

"You think she—she cares for you?" she asked, gently.

"I think she does."

"And you care for her?"

"How can I help it? She is such a sweet little thing; and, Constance, I should like to be your brother."

"You must not marry Pearl unless you are very fond of her—"

"But I am, Constance—I am really."

"I am sure you would always be very good to her. I could not bear her to marry anyone who would not be tender and indulgent to her. You see she has been accustomed to kindness all her life; she is the little pet of the family—perhaps we spoil her rather."

"You could trust her to me, couldn't you?'

"Yes, I am sure I could," she replied, smiling kindly up at him; and just then Moncrieffe entered, and the conversation changed.

Constance saw her husband glance sharply from herself to his cousin, and this made her silent and constrained during the remainder of Sir Eldred's visit. Moncrieffe was a little bit inclined to be out of temper, for Mrs Greville had ruffled him considerably by the persistent

way in which she had kept him talking at the carriage door, when all the time he was longing to get back to the drawing-room. But now he made himself very pleasant to his cousin, though he was careful to exclude Constance from the conversation as much as possible. Sir Eldred did not remain long after this, and Constance heaved a relieved sigh as he and Bruce left the room together. Presently the latter returned to the drawing-room for a paper which he had left in it, and then she spoke to him on a subject which had been weighing on her mind for some time.

"Bruce," she began rather anxiously, "do you know I think you had better not take Jack with us to the ball to-night."

"Why not?" asked Moncrieffe, surprised.

"Because then he would probably be thrown more into Harry's company."

"And why not—is there anything between them?"

"I'm afraid there will be soon if we don't take care of her. They were a good deal together at Dinachny, you see."

Moncrieffe indulged in a low whistle of surprise, and his wife added,—

"Of course I know it would be a very poor

marriage for Harry; that is why I warn you."

"All right; we had better take the man on the box to-night then. All the same, I would not like to stand in Harry's way, if she became really attached to anyone. With her peculiar temper, poor child, it will be of the utmost importance for her to love the man she marries."

Constance's private opinion was, that Harry's future husband would need to be very deeply attached to *her*, to stand her temper; but she said nothing, knowing that she could hardly expect the fond father to agree with her.

So that night when they started for the ball Harry saw to her dismay that the footman was prepared to accompany them.

"I thought Mr de Vere was to go with us on the box," she said, colouring.

"Oh, he's sure to have started before we reach Dunfern Cottage," replied Constance lightly.

"Not if your aunt told him we meant to take him," objected Harry.

"Let us hope she has forgotten," said Moncrieffe pleasantly, and Harry dared say no more, though she chafed inwardly.

On reaching Dunfern, however, they found that Jack had set off on foot for Dinachny long ago, Mrs Greville having forgotten, or omitted purposely, to say anything to him about the seat on his sister's box, since Constance had not seconded her husband's proposal.

"It is just as well Mrs Greville did forget," said Harry, rather hotly; "for it would have been very rude of us *not* to take Mr de Vere, after offering him a seat, if he had waited for us."

The first person she saw as she entered the ball-room at Dinachny was Jack, leaning against the door-post, and looking rather moody.

"Well, Mr de Vere, have you got your card full yet?" she asked, smiling and blushing becomingly.

"Not yet," he replied, brightening up as she continued to smile upon him.

And then he asked permission to put his name down for two dances. Harry would have liked him to put his name down for a good many more, but she assured herself that she would *make* him ask her for more dances when he came to dance with her.

Constance looked round anxiously for Pear as she entered, and presently saw her dancing with someone whom she (Constance) did not know. It was easy to see, from Pearl's face, that Sir Eldred had said nothing to her yet, for she was looking pale and unhappy, though almost more pretty than usual—for her blue tulle and satin dress suited her wonderfully well.

She had been out of the way when Sir Eldred returned from Moncrieffe Castle, and after dinner, she had also avoided him carefully. She had had to arrange a good many things for her aunt the last day or two, and being pre-occupied and unhappy, she had forgotten one or two directions her ladyship had given her, and thereby drawn down several severe reprimands upon herself for her carelessness, and altogether she was feeling utterly wretched to-night, although she was better dressed than she had ever been in her life (her dress was a present from Lady de Vere), and this was her first ball.

Constance was dismayed and pained when she caught sight of her sister, the girl looked so ill, and her violet eyes seemed unnaturally large and dark, from the deep black circles under them.

Presently Sir Eldred made his way up to Pearl's side, and begged her for a dance.

"I think my card is full," she faltered, colouring nervously, and looking down.

"Let me see," he said, taking her card from her hand, and boldly writing his name down for three waltzes.

Pearl was half pleased and half offended. She was glad he cared to dance with her, yet she did not like the masterful way in which he had taken possession of her card. He seemed so certain that she would be pleased to dance with him!

During their first two dances, Sir Eldred found it impossible to say what he wanted to Pearl, for in every secluded nook and corner to which he led her, he found some other couple established before him. So he had to content himself by being as agreeable as he could to her in a general sort of way; but he did not get much out of her, for she continued silent and reserved the whole time, and showed unmistakably (though unintentionally) that she was glad to escape from him at the termination of each dance. He was rather piqued at this, and when their third dance came, he resolved to come to the

point with her. She was to return to Dunfern Cottage the following day, and as he left the country on Monday there was no time to lose.

After the waltz was over, he led her upstairs to Lady de Vere's boudoir; the room was occupied, but there was a balcony outside one of the windows, and on to this the baronet led his partner, and found himself alone with her.

"It is rather cold here, isn't it?" said Pearl nervously. "Don't you think we had better go in?"

"No, wait a minute, Pearl," he said, hastily, taking her hand to detain her, as she was turning back towards the window.

She paused, with a little shiver, half of nervousness, half of cold—for it was a cool night, and she was suceptible to cold.

"I have been wanting to speak to you all the evening, Pearl," he continued, rapidly, but I could never get you alone. My little darling, why do you look so frightened? Surely you know that I love you—"

He had drawn her gently towards him, and was bending to look into her half-averted face,

when the rustle of a dress in the window made him pause abruptly in his speech, while Pearl hastily released her hand from his.

"Oh, here you are, Pearl," said Harry—for it was she—stepping on to the balcony, followed by Jack. "Lady de Vere was asking for you."

This was quite true, Lady de Vere had asked Harry to send Pearl to her, if she saw her; and when Harry caught sight of Pearl and Sir Eldred entering the boudoir, she had insisted on hastening after them, though Jack had tried to hold back, having a sort of suspicion that there was "something between" his sister and the baronet. But Harry had insisted on having her own way, and had felt almost a thrill of delight, as she saw what a tender scene she had interrupted. She was not spiteful as a rule, like Julia; but she had never forgiven Pearl or Sir Eldred for the humiliation which she had suffered last summer, and she was glad to do anything to annoy or tease them. She disliked Sir Eldred almost more than Pearl; just as (now) she disliked Pearl more than Constance; and the annoyed expression of his face as she appeared, diverted

her highly. Had she known of that little circumstance of the photo, she would not have interrupted him in this way, for she was not altogether illnatured; but though she certainly fancied Pearl liked Sir Eldred, she had no idea that he cared for her, and she regarded the girl as a contemptible little fool to go mooning after him. Also, she shrewdly suspected that Pearl had attempted to prejudice Jack against her, and she hated her for this more than for anything else.

Jack saw the mocking gleam in his beloved's eyes as she broke in upon his sister and her partner, and he felt almost angry with her. For a minute he could hardly believe that she had acted in this way on purpose; but when, ignoring alike Pearl's flushed face, and Sir Eldred's angry glances, she insisted on dawdling on the balcony until the other couple had quitted it, he could no longer mistake the malice of her motive. It was so unlike anything he had hitherto seen of Harry, that he was almost more surprised than pained; and he was very indignant too. He led his partner back to the ball-room in total silence, and Harry understood that he was offended with

her again. This was provoking, because she had been taking such pains all the evening to regain her old influence over him, and had quite succeeded in doing so, before her unlucky interference with his sister. Now she half wished she had left the girl alone, for, of course, Sir Eldred would have plenty of other opportunities of making love to her if he were so minded, and as she (Harry) was just about to return home, she would have no further chance of captivating Jack to-night.

As for Pearl and Sir Eldred, they also retraced their steps in silence, for the passages were all filled more or less with people, and he could only press her little hand closer to his side as he led her slowly along. He would say what he had to say to-morrow, he determined.

CHAPTER IX.

MR DAY PROPOSES.

THE following morning Pearl and Julia both returned to their respective homes. Julia was in high spirits, for she had enjoyed her ball last night very much; and Pearl was almost equally happy, for though Sir Eldred had no further opportunity of saying anything to her, she thought she could not mistake the meaning of what he had said last night. The two girls drove home in the same carriage, which had been sent from Moncrieffe to fetch Julia. As Dunfern Cottage was on the road to Moncrieffe, it was arranged that Pearl should accompany Julia, and be dropped at her own door.

"I will come over and see you this afternoon," said Sir Eldred, as he helped Pearl into the carriage; and she blushed and smiled shyly in reply.

On reaching Dunfern Cottage, however, she found that her mother and Aunt Fanny were to accompany her and Julia to the castle to lunch, and her heart sank as she reflected that perhaps Sir Eldred might call whilst she was out.

"I am tired," she pleaded. "Let me stay at home to-day, mother."

But Mrs de Vere insisted that Pearl ought to go and see her sister; and as the girl did not like to give her exact reason for wishing to remain at home, she had to yield the point.

It was arranged that Jack was to walk over to the castle in the afternoon, and escort his mother and aunt home; and Pearl could only whisper a timid entreaty to him not to be late in coming.

"All right," he replied; for the blush on his sister's cheek made him suspect the reason of her request; and with this promise Pearl had to console herself.

She did not have a very agreeable visit to

the castle this day; for Constance was occupied with her mother and Mrs Greville, and Harry and Julia took no notice of her.

After luncheon the Days made their appearance, as they had said they would, and they and the Moncrieffe girls wandered about the garden together, leaving Pearl alone. Constance was in her boudoir with her aunt and mother, talking about things which had not the remotest interest for Pearl; so she ensconced herself in a comfortable chair in the drawing-room, with a book which she had picked up off a table near, and fell into a reverie.

She had been seated like this for about half-an-hour, when Jack arrived, and he looked vexed at finding her thus deserted.

"Where are all the others?" he asked.

"Oh, Constance is upstairs, talking business to mother; and Harry and Julia never take any notice of me, you know," replied Pearl, laughing.

Jack bit his lip, and Pearl ran off to tell her mother that Jack had come to take them home. But Mrs de Vere appeared in no hurry to move; and though Constance came

down to the drawing-room, they all sat on, talking over their afternoon tea.

Presently Julia and the two Miss Days made their appearance, the former looking rather cross; for Harry and Edgar Day had disappeared together, and Julia was feeling the pangs of jealousy. She had fancied once or twice lately that Mr Day had seemed disposed to transfer his attentions from herself to Harry, if the latter gave him any encouragement, and she was miserable now as she wondered where they were, and what they were saying to each other. She would have been yet more perturbed could she have followed their wanderings, and heard all that passed between them.

Mr Day had strolled off with Harry down a secluded woody path, and she, being an arrant coquette, had flirted readily with him, and drawn him on to say all manner of sentimental rubbish, at which she secretly laughed. Not that he needed much encouragement, for he had always admired Harry greatly; and now that his sisters assured him it was all over between her and Sir Eldred Glendower, he had serious hopes of winning her

instead of Julia, for whom he entertained a good deal of contempt, and but little admiration.

"Harry," he exclaimed, at last, encouraged by the young lady's gracious manner, "why do you play with me like this? Do you not see the agony I am enduring? This may be play to you, but it is life or death to me!"

"Dear me, how tragic you are!" laughed Miss Moncrieffe. "Though I really cannot understand why you should be."

"Can't you? Don't you see that I adore you, Harry?"

"Really, I always fancied you were Ju's admirer."

"She is only next to the rose—the rose's sister. You are the rose, Harry. Do you suppose I could really care for a child like Julia, when I had *you* constantly before my eyes?"

"Come, come, Mr Day! you were often very devoted to her."

"I care no more for Julia than—than I do for Mrs M'Mickie."

"Then I think it was not very nice of you

to pay her so much attention," said Harry sharply.

"What could I do when you turned from me? I swear—"

"Don't take the trouble, Mr Day; it is no use."

"You are the only woman I have ever loved, or ever will love in my life."

"That is a pity; for I fear I cannot reciprocate your affection."

"You cannot seriously mean to reject my love, Harry?"

"I fear I must decline it with thanks."

Her tone showed her suitor the hopelessness of his cause, and he began to reflect how he might best prevent his present proposal reaching Julia's ears.

"Ah, you may mock me!" he said, reproachfully, "but the devotion of a faithful heart is not to be despised. Yet I daresay you will make me an object of derision in your own family."

"You need not be afraid of that," said Harry, rather contemptuously.

"You will not laugh at me behind my back? Promise me, Harry, that you will

not mention what has just passed between us to anyone."

"Why, do you want to continue making love to Julia?" laughed Harry carelessly.

"How can I, when I am going away to-morrow?" he asked, reproachfully.

"All right; I'll say nothing about it," she said, with good-natured contempt. "See, there is our minister, Mr Macdougal, going to call at the castle; let us see if we can't overtake him."

She hastened her steps, and soon overtook the minister, whose raw, red face glowed a yet deeper colour with delight at seeing her. As for Harry, she detested the man; but it amused her to make fun of him, and just now she found it convenient to end her *tête-à-tête* with Mr Day. She walked home between the two men, laughing at them both, and on reaching the castle she led them up the steps to the stone balcony outside the drawing-room window.

Julia's mind was relieved to see that her sister and Edgar Day had not been alone all this while, and as the latter instantly seated himself beside her, her jealousy began to fade.

"What a long time you have been!" she observed *sotto voce.* "I thought you must really be proposing to Harry."

"That is unkind of you, Julia," he whispered, tenderly. "I have been sounding your sister to see if we could not confide in her, for of course she could help us greatly, if she would. But I fear we must say nothing to her—she would betray us."

"Very likely she would," agreed Julia, who was now completely mollified.

In the meantime a good deal of loud laughing and talking was going on between Harry and the Day girls, who were all doing their best to turn poor Mr Macdougal into ridicule. Jack was half vexed by Harry's conduct, and yet he could not help being amused by it. Now and then he found himself laughing too, in spite of his ill-humour. For Harry had accorded a very slight, supercilious greeting to his mother, and had taken no notice at all of Pearl; and though she had been very gracious to himself, he could not overlook the slight to his mother and sister.

Presently Harry went to the piano, and began to sing comic songs. Edgar Day had

a good voice, and sang too, and the rest joined in the chorus. Harry did not mean to annoy Constance by this, and quite forgot that the noise and laughter might be unpleasant to the married ladies, who found it impossible to talk while the singing was going on.

"Suppose we come to my own room again," Constance suggested; and Pearl also slipped away after them, for she felt herself left out in the cold among the Days and the Moncrieffe girls.

But Jack stood his ground, for he had no objection to noise, and though he was vexed to see his sister snubbed, he was very fond of comic songs.

CHAPTER X.

MRS M'MICKIE DOES HER DUTY.

THAT afternoon, when Sir Eldred called at Dunfern Cottage, he was informed that the ladies were at Moncrieffe Castle, and, for a moment, he was disposed to be offended. But then he reflected that probably Pearl had been forced to accompany her mother against her will; and he set out for the castle, intending to accompany her home. Presently he overtook Sir Charles, who was riding, and had paused to contemplate a young larch plantation which he had lately planted. He exchanged several remarks about them with his guest, and then, putting his horse into a

walk, continued to converse with the younger man upon topics dear to the heart of the country landowner, but uninteresting to the rest of mankind. They soon came in sight of Drum, and Sir Charles was about to bid adieu to his companion and trot on, when he paused in surprise at an unexpected apparition on the top of the Drum garden wall. This was neither more nor less than Frank de Vere, with a fine gooseberry bush in his hands, which he had apparently torn up by the roots on being disturbed, while stripping it of its fruit, by the gardener. And here let me remark, for the benefit of my south country readers, that among the Scotch hills there are often gooseberries as late as the end of September or beginning of October. Frank swung himself down on the outer side of the wall, and made off into the neighbouring wood with his prize; while Fred and Charlie also appeared over the wall in quick succession, and followed their brother's lead; and then, to Sir Charles's unutterable horror, Josh's head appeared over the wall. He was not so nimble as his cousins, however, and he remained seated on the wall, apparently held

prisoner by his legs, which remained dangling on the garden side of the wall.

"I say, you fellow, let me go," he cried, kicking violently; but his captor held him fast; and just then, to complete the *tableau*, Mrs M'Mickie herself appeared at the garden gate, followed by Miss Patsey Trotter, who looked nervous and unhappy.

"What is the meaning of *that?*" asked the former lady of Sir Charles, pointing severely to the young man on her wall.

"My dear madam, I really do not know," replied the baronet; and just then Josh disappeared off the wall with a jerk, and a heavy thud told that he had descended into the garden. In another minute he appeared at the garden gate, vainly trying to shake off the solemn butler, who retained a firm hold of his arm, though he could not restrain his movements.

"I wish you, fellow, would let me go," said Josh crossly, as, with a final twist, he shook off the butler's grip.

"What is the meaning of all this, Munro?" asked Mrs M'Mickie majestically.

"It means that Martin" (the gardener) "is

out of the way, as usual, ma'am," replied the solemn butler, "and this young gentleman and his cousins have been robbing your garden; and Mr Frank de Vere has gone clean off with one of your finest gooseberry bushes."

"Really, Josh, you are no more to be trusted than a schoolboy," said Sir Charles testily.

"It was all those fellows," replied the young man stolidly. "They got me to come with them, you know."

"And pray are you not old enough to know better than to rob a lady's garden merely because you are invited to do so?" demanded the irate old gentleman. "I suppose you would not object to rob the bank if anyone asked you to do so?"

"Oh! that's gammon, you know," returned Josh impatiently.

Sir Charles attempted to speak, but choked in the effort; and Sir Eldred suggested that they should proceed on their way. Mrs M'Mickie's wrath had been considerably assuaged by the vehemence of Sir Charles's anger with his son, and she agreed to Sir Eldred's proposition at once.

"I am going to Dunfern Cottage to speak with Mrs de Vere on a very important subject," she observed.

"Mrs de Vere is at Moncrieffe with Mrs Greville and Pearl," said the young man, the last name slipping out unawares.

"Then we will go there, Patsey. Sir Charles, I would be glad if you would accompany us, for, as the head of your family, I consider you ought to be made acquainted with what I am about to impart to your sister-in-law."

The allusion to his being the "head of the family," won a ready assent from the old gentleman, who was riding merely for exercise, and without any special object, and passing the bridle of his horse over his arm, he walked on beside the ladies, while Josh followed with Sir Eldred.

It was about a mile from Drum to the castle, and the party traversed that distance in silence. Sir Eldred laughed to himself at the solemnity of their carriage, but judged it wiser to fall in with the humour of the others.

As they entered the gates of Moncrieffe

park they caught sight of Mrs M'Mickie's truant gardener, Martin, gossiping with the lodge-keeper. As he was to quit her service in a few days, the indignant lady felt that she had no power to punish him further just at present, but she turned down the corners of her mouth, and decided to give him a bad character.

As the party approached the castle they heard the sound of singing and laughing proceeding from the drawing-room window, which Harry had left open when she entered with Mr Day.

Mrs M'Mickie's face seemed to become yellower at the sound, and Sir Eldred remarked that they seemed to be having "high jinks" in there.

"And if I mistake not that is Mr Macdougal's voice," he added, mischievously.

Mrs M'Mickie said nothing, but straightway she mounted the steps to the balcony, and the others followed her.

"There's a congregation of the wicked for you," drawled Sir Eldred, as they paused at the open window.

Those inside had their backs turned to it,

and did not perceive Mrs M'Mickie and her followers, who stood still, contemplating the scene within. At the piano sat Harry, playing accompaniments, while beside her stood Mr Macdougal, singing, with melancholy accent and solemn demeanour, that old comic song, "The Horticultural Wife," and casting melting glances at Miss Moncrieffe as he did so.

The following are the words he sang, in case anyone may chance not to know them :—

"We've grown up together like young apple trees,
And clung together like double sweet-peas;
Now they're going to trim her, and plant her in a pot,
While I'm left to wither, neglected and forgot.

I'm like a bumble bee, that doesn't know where to settle,
And she's a dandelion, and a stinging nettle;
My heart's like a beetroot choked with chickweed,
And my head's like a pumkkin running to seed.

I'm like a scarlet runner that has lost its stick,
Or a cherry that is left for the dicky birds to pick;
Like a watering pot I'll weep, like a pavior I'll sigh,
Like a mushroom I'll wither, like a cucumber I'll die."

"Mr Macdougal! can I believe my ears?" exclaimed Mrs M'Mickie, as the noisy chorus and laughter died away.

The poor minister stood staring with mute dismay at his grim patroness, who had now advanced into the middle of the room, and everyone else seemed struck dumb by her sudden appearance too. But Harry's quick tongue was not to be so easily silenced, and after a moment's pause, she said, lightly,—

"We are only teaching Mr Macdougal some new psalm tunes, Mrs M'Mickie."

Mrs M'Mickie grew almost green at this mocking address, and Mr Macdougal yet redder.

"Yes, you may well look eaten up with shame, Alexander Macdougal," said the former, in a sharp, quivering voice. "What manner of song is *that* for a sober, godly man—let alone a minister—to sing! Comparing yourself to a pumpkin, and a scarlet runner, indeed! Man is but as the grass of the field; or as a vapour which passeth away. Oh, miserable sinners!"

The last words were uttered in a supulchral whisper, and as she pronounced them, Mrs M'Mickie shut her eyes, and folded her hands devoutly one over the other.

"And who may the young woman in the song be?" asked Miss Patsey injudiciously.

"My beloved's nose is as the tower of Lebanon, looking unto Damascus," responded Mr Macdougal, casting a glance of melancholy meaning at Harry's pretty little *nez rétroussé;* and Mrs M'Mickie, opening her eyes just in time to catch the look, turned, with a suppressed groan, to leave the room.

"Oh, dear aunt, pray don't go like that," cried Julia, flying forward to detain her. But Mrs M'Mickie marched on towards the door in unmoved anger; but suddenly she paused, and wheeling suddenly round upon Harry, demanded, sourly,—

"Can I see your mother?"

"My mother?" echoed Harry, in feigned surprise.

"Aye, your mother."

"Do you mean Mrs Moncrieffe?"

"Well, don't you call your father's wife your mother?"

"No, I certainly do not," returned Harry firmly.

She was half disposed, in spite of herself, to like Constance, but she could not bring herself to call her *mother.*

Jack coloured at her words, and Mrs M'Mickie sniffed.

"Aye, I expect she's had a fine time of it with you, poor young woman," remarked the latter lady. "I want to speak to her, and her mother and sister too, if you'll call them."

"I'll call them, dear aunt," cried Julia eagerly, as Harry showed no disposition to move.

She left the room, and presently returned, followed by Constance, and her mother, sister, and aunt.

"How do you do, Mrs M'Mickie?" said Constance. "What a long time it is since we have seen you."

Mrs M'Mickie only groaned in response, and shut her eyes. Then opening them suddenly, and waving her hand towards the two Miss Days, she said,—

"Would those two young persons mind leaving the room? What I have to say is of a painful and private nature. No, you stay, Mr Day, it concerns you. Mr Macdougal, and Mr de Vere" (to Josh), "you had best accompany those young ladies. The rest may stay."

The four people thus indicated left the room, rather sullenly; but both Harry and Julia were far too curious to hear what was coming to offer to accompany their friends.

For several minutes there was a profound silence in the room, then Mrs M'Mickie turned to Mrs de Vere, and began, solemnly,—

"What I am about to say is of a truly painful nature, and nothing but a sense of duty would induce me to say it. Your daughter has always appeared to me a singularly well-behaved young person, though a bit foolish perhaps, but it is my task to inform you that she has been guilty of grave indiscretion and deception."

Pearl opened her eyes, and flushed indignantly, and Mrs de Vere began coldly,—

"I do not believe—"

"Let me finish," interrupted Mrs M'Mickie severely. "You have remarked in my presence, Mrs de Vere, that you greatly disliked Mr Day."

Mrs de Vere coloured and looked uncomfortable, while Mr Day smiled and bowed.

"Therefore," proceeded the old lady severely,

"you will be all the more shocked at what I have to tell you."

"I do not see the use of all this mystery," said Mrs de Vere, drawing herself up haughtily.

"Yesterday," said Mrs M'Mickie sternly, "Patsey Trotter saw Mr Day embracing your daughter down the glen."

Sensation! Pearl flushed crimson, and then glancing across at Sir Eldred, turned white as death. Injured innocence does not always look innocent, and Pearl's varying colour might have meant anything.

"Probably Miss de Vere has been in the habit of meeting the gentleman, unknown to you," proceeded the old lady, before anyone could recover their breath sufficiently to say a word; "for of late I have several times encountered Mr Day in the glen, hanging about, and I fancied he could be up to no good."

"It is not true," faltered Pearl. Her cheeks were burning, and there was a choking in her throat which almost strangled her words; but she felt she must say something, so stammered out her lame defence.

"No, indeed, I do not believe it to be true," said Mrs de Vere haughtily, while Constance clasped her sister's hand kindly within both her own.

"Really!" snapped Mrs M'Mickie, "this is the first time in my life I have ever been accused of an untruth. However, here is an eyewitness. Speak Patsey Trotter."

"Indeed," cried poor Miss Patsey, on the verge of tears, "I never meant to say a word about it. How Jemima got it out of me, I'm sure I can't tell."

"Patsey, do as I tell you—speak out, and tell us whether you saw Miss Pearl and Mr Day down the glen yesterday," insisted her cousin.

"I do not see the use of all this," interposed Mrs de Vere coldly. "I have perfect confidence in my daughter, and I would rather not pursue this subject further."

"You ought to be deeply obliged to me for informing you of your daughter's misbehaviour," observed Mrs M'Mickie, drawing the corners of her mouth tightly down. "But as you have chosen to cast a doubt upon my veracity, I feel bound to prove the truth of what I say. Patsey, speak. Did you see that

young woman and that gentleman in the glen yesterday?"

"Yes," groaned Miss Trotter. "I certainly did."

"I do not wish to cast any doubt on Miss Trotter's word," said Sir Charles. "But is it not highly possible that she mistook someone else for my niece?"

"It is quite possible I did so," agreed the little lady, in a relieved tone.

"Patsey, did you not assure me you recognised her distinctly?" demanded Mrs M'Mickie wrathfully.

"Well, I certainy *thought* it was her."

"But you could not be certain?" struck in Jack.

"No—not exactly."

"Patsey, did you not assure me that you saw her?"

"Yes—yes."

"Then what do you mean by saying you did *not* see her?"

"I don't think Miss Trotter quite knows what she *does* mean," added Jack angrily.

Miss Patsey gazed round on her assailers in terror and bewilderment.

"Eh, deary me! I'm sure I never meant to say a word about it, for I hate telling tales," she cried, beginning to whimper.

"Perhaps you will be so good as to explain what you mean by speaking of my sister in this way," said Jack sternly.

"I don't mean any harm, indeed. I only saw a young lady in a blue shawl like that" (pointing to one of Pearl's lying on a chair near), "and with a blue parasol which I knew to be Miss Pearl's."

"An indecent blue thing," struck in Mrs M'Mickie, with a snort. "When *I* was a girl, I never used anything but an umbrella to keep off the rain in inclement weather!"

Everyone was silent for a minute, for Pearl's blue shawl and parasol were well known to all of them, and for a minute they were staggered. Sir Eldred also remembered to have seen Pearl entering the house in the identical shawl yesterday afternoon.

"I did not see the young lady's face," explained Miss Trotter eagerly. "I only saw Mr Day's."

"Oh, Mr Day! tell them that it was not *me*," cried Pearl, on the verge of tears.

Mr Day hesitated for an instant; and by

that hesitation seemed to confirm Mrs M'Mickie's charge. Not that he wished to do so, but he felt another pair of eyes besides Pearl's fixed imploringly upon him, and for a moment he really did not know what to say.

"I was not in the glen at all yesterday," he ventured boldly, at last; but they had all marked his hesitation, and knew that he did not speak the truth.

At this minute the door opened and Josh thrust in his head.

"I say, are you people going to be all day?" he demanded. "It's nearly dinner time, you know."

"Go away, Josh," said his father sharply; and Josh was about to retire, grumbling, when Mrs M'Mickie stopped him.

"Wait a minute, young man," she said. "Just go down to the lodge and tell my gardener to come up and speak to me, if he is still there!"

Josh departed unwillingly, and Sir Charles suggested that they should drop the discussion.

"Martin saw Mr Day and a lady down the glen yesterday, so I'll just wait and see what *he* has to say on the subject."

Then ensued a sharp argument, in the midst of which Constance led her sister from the room. Everyone felt that it was atrocious taste to press the subject further. If Mrs M'Mickie felt it her duty to say anything to Mrs de Vere, she ought to have done so in private. It was shameful to attack the girl before a large party in this way. At first Pearl's friends had allowed the question to be discussed, in hopes of clearing her; but now that they began to doubt her, they tried their utmost to silence Mrs M'Mickie. Sir Eldred had retired into the balcony at the commencement of the discussion, feeling that it would be bad taste for him to remain in the room; but though he stood out of sight, he remained where he could hear every word that passed, and he began to suspect that there might be some truth in this tale after all. Had he not seen Pearl in her blue shawl yesterday? And did he not know her to be a little flirt? Evidently Miss Trotter was not speaking from ill-nature, and Mr Day was unable to deny her charge. Certainly Pearl had always struck Sir Eldred as being truthful; but after all he knew very little of her, and she had evidently

deceived her mother in this instance. Very likely Miss Trotter made the worst of the case, but still Sir Eldred did not feel disposed to marry a girl who could make appointments to meet another admirer in secret, without anyone's knowledge. He was sufficiently fond of her to feel pained by the revelation which had just been made, yet not so deeply in love as to overlook it. Apparently Josh must have encountered Martin before he reached the lodge, for in a very few minutes Sir Eldred saw the two approaching the castle together.

On catching sight of Sir Eldred, Josh came up the balcony steps, followed by the gardener.

"Here's the fellow," he said, stepping through the open drawing-room window; "but I say, you know, he's rather—"

"Hush, hush," said his father impatiently; and Josh turned indignantly away, muttering that "they would soon see for themselves."

"I cannot allow my niece's affairs to be discussed before a gardener," cried Sir Charles indignantly.

"I have no intention of discussing them," returned Mrs M'Mickie, with dignity. "I merely

purpose to ask the man a simple question. Martin" (advancing towards the window), "did you see a gentleman and lady down the glen yesterday?"

"Ay, ay, to be sure I did. They was a-kissing, and a—"

"Don't talk nonsense, sir! I merely want you to tell me the names of the parties."

But the man proceeded without heeding her.

"They was a-kissing; and a-squeezing each other's hands; and a-going on like, I never saw what—"

"I see you have been at the whisky, my man," said Jack severely. "He is not in a state to know what he's saying, Mrs M'Mickie."

"He's quite sober enough to tell me their names," insisted the lady obstinately.

"Well, then, it was just Mistress M'Mickie hersel', and the minister, Sandy Macdougal," replied Martin confidentially.

"You are not in a fit state to speak, sir," she said, in a quivering voice. "Do you not know that all drunkards have their portion in the lake of fire?"

But when was a Scotchman ever at a loss in a war of texts? Martin looked in no wise abashed by his mistress's awful denunciation, but replied, promptly,—

"It is na that as geas intil a man's mouth as defileth a man; but it's the hard words, and uncharitable sayings as comes out on our mouths—them's what defiles us, Mistress M'Mickie."

"You are drunk, sir!" said Mrs M'Mickie, turning majestically away.

"*So are you!*" retorted the man, with a grin.

"Come, Patsey, it is time for us to be going home," said the old lady sharply, while the others tried to suppress their smiles.

Mr Day also made his escape as fast as he could, looking rather sheepish.

"By Jove! that was a near shave," he remarked, as he and his sisters were driving home again.

"I hope you haven't got that poor little girl into a nasty scrape," said Carry gravely. "But of course you could say nothing."

CHAPTER XI.

A CATASTROPHE.

WHILE all this was going on in the drawing-room, poor Pearl was sobbing hysterically upstairs in her sister's arms. She confided to her Sir Eldred's half-spoken confession of love last night, and his promise to call at Dunfern Cottage to-day, and her own fears lest Mrs M'Mickie's story should induce him to change his mind. Constance felt alarmed on this score too, and presently she left Pearl and went downstairs, hoping to be able to say a word for her sister to the young man. He had left, however, when she re-entered the drawing-room, and she had to return and confess

this to Pearl, who was plunged into fresh despair by the news.

On Monday, Constance drove over to her mother's house. Mrs Greville was going away to-day, and had begged her niece to lend her her carriage to take her to the station, in order to escape the expense of hiring a fly. So Constance drove to Dunfern Cottage, and said she would wait till the carriage returned from the station. Sir Eldred was leaving Dinachny, too, this morning, and Constance knew that if he had not completed his offer to her sister by this time, he would never do so at all. Pearl was not visible when Constance first reached the cottage, but presently she came down to bid Mrs Greville good-bye, looking so pale and heavy-eyed that it was evident, without asking, that she had heard nothing further from Sir Eldred.

"Eldred is going to-day," whispered Mrs Greville to Constance. "I'm afraid that hateful old witch, Mrs M'Mickie, has driven him away from Pearl, poor, dear girl! Though certainly she has been very indiscreet, you know."

Constance bit her lip, but had no time to

say anything in her sister's defence, for Mrs Greville was in a hurry to catch her train. Just after she had gone, Charlie, who had not been present to bid her good-bye, came rushing in, and hugged his sister cordially.

"I say," he cried, "is Aunt Fan gone? I've been looking for that 'Vanity Fair' I lent her, and I can't find it anywhere."

"Perhaps she's taken it with her," suggested Constance, who knew her aunt's ways and manners tolerably well by this time.

"I say, what a beastly shame if she has!" cried Fred. "Why, *I* haven't read it yet."

The three boys went off to hunt for the missing volume (which, however, they never found), and soon Pearl crept away too, leaving her mother and Constance alone together.

"How quiet you will be to-morrow, when the boys go to school!" began the latter.

The boys had been removed from the Clinchester school, and had been entered for a good Scotch one, which was nearer, and to which the journey was not so expensive. Hence their long holiday, for the Scotch school returned to work later than the Clinchester one.

"Indeed I shall be very glad of the quiet," answered Mrs de Vere wearily. "My dear, I have something awful to tell you—for I see by your face that you know nothing."

"Know what? Is it about Pearl?"

"No, no, poor child, not about her. Constance, have you not read the papers to-day?"

"Not yet—why?"

"Then you do not know that the A— bank has failed?"

"The A— bank!" cried Constance, half dazed.

"It is in the paper to-day. My dear, I am ruined, for it is an unlimited company, and all I have is in it, except the hundred a-year which your poor father settled upon me at my marriage."

Mrs de Vere spoke quietly, for she did not wish to frighten Constance more than possible and she was not the sort of woman to break down under misfortune. But in reality she was sick at heart, for she saw the full horror of her position clearly.

"Thank goodness, you are well married, my darling!" she said, fervently.

"Oh, mother, I am sure Bruce will help you."

"My love, I could not consent to accept help from him."

"Oh, mother!"

"My dear, it is no use talking about that yet."

It was with drooping spirits that Constance drove home again. Jack had accompanied his aunt to the station, and he came back looking terribly "down."

"I don't know what's to be done with the mother and Pearl," he said, as he handed his sister into her carriage. "And the boys are almost too young to do anything for themselves yet."

If only Pearl had been engaged to Sir Eldred, it would have been such a weight off all their minds, though the baronet was certainly not very well off. Still he would not have been a bad match for Pearl, and it was pitiable to see the poor child droop and pine as she did after his departure. She never complained, and no one ventured to say anything to her on the subject; but she became really ill, and could neither sleep nor eat,

though she tried bravely to hide this from her mother.

That Sir Eldred should have forsaken her after all that had passed between them was pain enough to her; but her agony was doubled by the knowledge that he had left her, thinking badly of her. No wonder the poor child was ill; and Constance hardly knew whether she was more miserable about her sister or her mother.

Bruce was very generous in his offers of assistance to the latter; but Mrs de Vere resolutely declined them all, as yet. Time enough to talk of these things when she found how she was really situated. She would not accept more help from her son-in-law than she was absolutely obliged to.

It was about a fortnight after the crash that the Moncrieffes' ball came off. Constance had no spirits for it now; but the invitations had all been issued long ago, and it would have been a terrible disappointment to the girls to have put it off. As Julia had attended the Dinachny ball, it was agreed that she might appear at this one, too—but in a short dress; on this Constance insisted,

and Julia was reduced to tears by her firmness. Harry, too, was cross because the Days were not invited, but she had sufficient good taste to leave Constance in peace during this trying time, though she fumed inwardly.

By the time the ball day arrived, the worst was known. Mrs de Vere had absolutely nothing in the world but the hundred a-year, which, being a marriage settlement, could not be touched. Sir Charles de Vere, of course, continued to let her have Dunfern Cottage rent free, but he had been too deeply offended with Frank to give her any further assistance. He sent her one hundred pounds for her immediate expenses, but beyond this he would do nothing. She had gratefully accepted Moncrieffe's offer to provide for her boys' schooling, but she would accept no sort of allowance from him; and it seemed impossible that she and Pearl should live on one hundred a-year.

"Pearl must come and live with us," said Moncrieffe, when the state of the case was explained to him.

Jack had come up to the castle to give this final report, and he was in the room when

Bruce made this remark. Harry and Julia were in the room too, and the look of deep vexation on their faces as they heard their father's words did not escape Jack. Mrs de Vere had informed him that she had cut Pearl's visit to the Moncrieffes short this summer, because she found she was unkindly received there by Harry and Julia; and now Jack could well believe that she had spoken the truth.

He forbore to thank his brother-in-law for his offer, therefore; and Bruce, reading his daughters' faces aright, was almost glad that the young man let the subject drop.

When Jack took his leave, Constance contrived to accompany him to the door, and warned him not to repeat what Bruce had said about Pearl to his mother.

"Of course it would be charming for me to have the dear child with me," she said. "But though Bruce is very fond of Pearl, his girls are not—"

"Ah, yes, I know," said Jack moodily. "I daresay they are talking him out of it now."

And so they were. As soon as they were alone, Julia attacked her father impetuously on the subject, and implored him not to have that horrid Pearl de Vere to live with them always.

"I never discovered that she was so horrid," he replied, coldly.

"Oh, but she is! I should be miserable if she were to live with us always."

"Do you object, too, Harry?" asked Moncrieffe.

For an instant Harry hesitated, for she knew that, if her father allowed his offer to fall through, Jack would suppose she had used her influence against his sister, and would naturally think her unkind. But she did greatly dislike the idea of having Pearl to live with them constantly, and replied, slowly,—

"Yes, I do object."

"Very well," said her father coldly. "I certainly should not think of having the poor girl to live with us if you are so determined to be her enemies. She would only be miserable with you. Far better let her be a governess at once."

A governess! Harry had not supposed that it would actually come to this, and she felt almost guilty as she heard her father's words. But just then Constance returned to the room, and no more could be said on the subject.

CHAPTER XII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

THE ball at Moncrieffe Castle passed off with very little pleasure to the givers. Julia certainly enjoyed herself, but the rest of the family, including Harry, were in miserable spirits. Harry, indeed, was about as unhappy as she could well be, for Jack de Vere was going to rejoin his ship on Saturday (this was Tuesday), and she might not see him again for years. She had seen nothing of him for the last two or three days, and when they had last met, his manner had been cold and reserved. She was sure he cared for her, though, perhaps, not so much as she cared for him; but his people had evidently poisoned his mind against her.

And he was so poor and so proud, that probably the mere fact of her having money kept him at a distance. Of late, since her family troubles, she had behaved quite nicely to Constance in spite of her vexation about the Days being excluded from the ball; but Jack had not been present to see this, and it seemed to Harry that her step-mother did all she could to keep him away from Moncrieffe. She resented this bitterly, and of late one or two trifling things had served to strengthen this idea. Consequently her manner to Constance had been fitful and uncertain since her return home. She had lost much of her old prejudice against, and dislike of, her step-mother; and she felt that as she was in such trouble about her family just now, she ought to be treated with forbearance. And yet if she were trying to divert Jack from his allegiance to her (Harry), the girl felt that she could not forgive her. And then there were the Days. So altogether Harry was hardly in a mood to enjoy her ball. Neither Jack nor his mother nor Pearl were at it, for the latter was too unwell, and the others too depressed, to care to join in the gaiety; so the whole

ball was a blank to Harry, and it must be confessed that she was rather cross and snappish to her sister, step-mother, and partners. After all the guests had departed, Julia came to her sister's room to talk over the events of the ball, and relate her triumphs; but Harry turned her unceremoniously away, saying that she was too tired to sit up talking nonsense.

"If you were out, and accustomed to have heaps of fools paying you attention, as I am," she said, contemptuously, "you wouldn't be so stuck up every time you get a compliment paid you."

"Oh, indeed!" cried Julia, flushing scarlet. "What do you bet, Lady Harriet, that I am not married before *you*, though I'm *not* out?"

"Oh, bother! leave me alone," responded Harry pettishly; and when Julia had retired in high dudgeon, she locked the door, and indulged in a fit of bitter weeping.

The following day Moncrieffe set off for London, where he was to use his personal influence to get Frank de Vere into a house of business, the senior partner of which happened to be a friend of his own. If Mr Clay could

not find employment for the lad in his own house, he might be able to get him into some other one; so Moncrieffe took the trouble of going up to town himself; and Constance felt very grateful to him for the sympathy he had exhibited for her mother's trouble. This same day too, the various guests, who had been staying in the house for the ball, took their departure, feeling themselves in the way; and so Constance and her step-daughters were left alone together. All Wednesday Julia was in the wildest spirits; she seemed quite to have forgiven her sister for her contemptuous words of last night, and to be bent upon winning her into a good temper. But Harry was not to be so won, and continued moody and cross all day. Constance, who understood the cause of the girl's irritability, bore with her very sweetly, feeling almost sorry for her, though she was none the less resolved to save Jack from marrying her, if possible. But though her step-mother's gentleness made her feel ashamed of her own temper, it only increased Harry's bad humour, and made her, if possible, more unhappy than ever.

On Tuesday morning Julia took a long,

solitary ramble, to work off the excitement that was consuming her; and as she was passing near Dunfern Cottage, she encountered Jack de Vere, who said he was coming up to see Constance that afternoon. On reaching home Julia informed her step-mother, in Harry's presence, of her brother's message; and Constance replied, hastily, that she was going to Dunfern Cottage herself, to see her mother; and ringing the bell, ordered her carriage to be at the door by half-past two, saying that she hoped to meet her brother on his way to the castle, or to reach Dunfern before he started.

"She wants to keep him away from me," thought Harry savagely.

Just before luncheon, the two Miss Days drove up, and sent their fly round to the stable to put up, when Julia, who, by a strange coincidence, happened to be waiting at the hall-door as they arrived, suggested their doing so. Constance was vexed to see them, and not a little offended when she heard that they had already accepted Julia's invitation to lunch. But her displeasure was considerably lessened when she found that they had come

to say good-bye, as they were leaving Dunkillie on Saturday. It would be a comfort to have them out of the country. Her manner to them was perfectly civil, but very cold, and she took little notice of them, but left her step-daughters to entertain them.

Harry was sore and miserable about Jack, and her temper was not improved by her step-mother's want of cordiality to her friends. She was unusually affectionate to Carry, and spoke to her step-mother in a defiant, almost insolent tone, which tried Constance, particularly before strangers.

She had no intention of deferring her drive on account of the Days, and at half-past two set off for her mother's house, after bidding Carry, who happened to be in the way, a careless farewell, and concerning herself very little because Netta had disappeared with Julia.

Harry, who was with Carry in the drawing-room, was vexed, but hardly surprised by her step-mother's manner. There was nothing rude in it, cold though it was, and Harry knew enough of society by this time to be aware that many ladies would have been

almost, if not altogether, insolent to people whose acquaintance they wished to "drop." But Carry appeared so hurt, and said so many spiteful things, in a martyrised tone, that Harry was worked into a fresh state of indignation against her step-mother. Not that she altogether believed what Carry said, as she used to do.

What Constance had said about Miss Day's being an unprincipled mischief-maker, had put new ideas into her head. But while she saw distinctly that Carry was deliberately trying to set her against her step-mother, she could not resist allowing herself to be so set—for the time being. In her heart of hearts she knew that she was unjust, and that Constance was only doing what she considered to be her duty in discouraging the Days, and trying to keep Jack away from the house; but none the more could she control her temper.

Soon after Constance's departure, Julia and Netta came into the drawing-room, the latter also in her hat.

"Harry, such a joke!" cried Netta, embracing Miss Moncrieffe, rather more effusively than the latter quite approved of. "I'm going

to carry Ju off to Dunkillie with me till Saturday."

Harry opened her eyes in astonishment, as Netta proceeded to explain that, having Edgar's vacant room on their hands, she thought it would be delightful to have Julia with them for a day or two. Harry knew quite well that her father and Constance would disapprove highly of such a visit, and felt that Julia ought to have informed Constance of the plan, whether she meant to listen to her remonstrances or not. But she told herself that it was not her place to interfere, though she was a little hurt by the way in which Netta had ignored her, while inviting Julia.

"Ju and I have been packing all this time," giggled Netta, passing her arm round Harry's waist, and trying to make her waltz round the room. "Isn't it a joke Mrs Moncrieffe's going off so conveniently? She'd have been sure to kick up no end of a rumpus if she'd been here—stupid old thing!"

But Harry withdrew herself from Netta's encircling clasp; and then Julia, who was flushed and impatient, suggested that they

should go downstairs, where the Days' fly was in waiting.

"Yes," agreed Netta, "let's get off before that old cat of a step-mother comes back."

"Harry must come with us too—for the rest of the day at anyrate," suggested Carry, but in rather a doubtful tone.

Netta and Julia both made a face at her, and Harry, chancing to catch the expression of Netta's face, felt that she was not wanted, and declined coldly. Perhaps it was because she was hurt by this conduct on the part of the Days, that she felt half inclined to take offence at Netta's rude allusions to Constance. For after all Constance was Mr Moncrieffe's wife, and it was surely impertinent of Netta to call her a *cat.*

In the hall they found two neat portmanteaux, and Harry exclaimed that her sister seemed to be taking a lot of luggage for a two days' visit.

"Oh, and my dressing-case!" cried Julia.

But at this minute Mrs Dean, who had helped Julia with her packing, and had the boxes carried to her room that morning,

appeared with the missing dressing-case in her hand.

"I hope you'll have a pleasant visit, my deary," she said, fondly, to the girl; and then she stood looking on while the footman raised the first trunk on to the roof. While this was being done, Netta uttered a sudden cry of dismay.

"Why, if that isn't Mrs Moncrieffe coming back again! The nasty, sly, spying old fox! The ill-natured old cat!"

Carry cast an angry glance at her sister, for she saw, from the heightened colour of Harry's face, that she was disposed to resent this disrespectful mention of her step-mother in the servants' presence.

"I'm sure she's done it on purpose," added Julia, but in a discreetly modulated tone, hearable only to the other girls and Mrs Dean. "Oh, Mrs Dean, do make them be quick. If Constance comes, she won't let me go," she added, half sobbing.

"Never you fear, my sweet," said the house-keeper. Now, Charles, are you going to be all day with that box?"

But Charles, who hated Mrs Dean, and

enjoyed the prospect of the coming fight, let the trunk slip to the ground, just as he had hoisted it to the fly roof. At the same minute Mrs Moncrieffe's carriage drew up. She had picked up her brother on the road to Dunfern, and been informed by him that her mother was particularly anxious to see a letter which she (Constance) had received from a mutual friend that morning, so had turned back to the castle to get it.

"You had better wait till I get the letter," she said, as she opened the door of the carriage, which was a close one, and sprang out. "I won't be a minute."

She saw that Harry was standing at the door, and did not wish Jack to stand talking to her while she hunted for the letter; and Jack allowed himself to be shut into the carriage without remonstrance, though he too had caught sight of Harry.

"So you are going, Miss Day?" said Constance as she approached the group at the door. "Why, what are those boxes for?"

"I am going to stay with Carry and Netta till Saturday," explained Julia, quaking inwardly, but putting a bold face on.

"Yes, Mrs Moncrieffe, it was a sudden thought of ours, after you had gone," added Carry deprecatingly.

"Really, Julia must have been very quick packing those two portmanteaux," observed Mrs Moncrieffe drily. "I am sorry, however, that I cannot allow her to accept your kind invitation."

"Why not? It is no business of yours," cried Julia passionately, with tears of fear and excitement in her eyes.

"Her governess arrives to-morrow, and as she has had such a long holiday, I think she ought to waste no more time," said Constance, still addressing Miss Day, and quietly ignoring Julia's words. "Stephens," to the butler, "see that those boxes are taken upstairs at once."

Stephens and Charles hastened to execute their mistress's orders, and Julia's passion passed all bounds as she saw her boxes removed.

"It is a shame—an *awful* shame!" she cried. "You just do it out of spite; you know you do."

Such language before her own servants was

very trying to Constance, but she remained firm, and took no heed of the girl's angry speech. But as the servants were dragging back one trunk, Julia sprang forward, and seized the other, calling piteously on Harry to help her.

"What are you good for, you fellow?" asked Miss Moncrieffe, coming to her sister's aid, and addressing the driver. "Hoist this up, can't you?"

"You shall be well paid—as well as you like," added Julia eagerly.

"Harry, how can you encourage your sister?" said Constance. "You know she must not go."

"It's no business of yours," replied Harry sullenly. "We are old enough to be our own mistresses now."

Of course she knew that Constance was right, but she was angry with her about Jack; and the slight imperiousness in her step-mother's manner, which in truth arose chiefly from nervousness, irritated her yet further.

Turning to the fly-man, Constance bid him leave the box alone; whereupon Harry

ordered him imperiously to put it up, and Julia repeated that he should be well paid.

"I forbid you to touch that box," repeated Constance, in a tone which made the man hesitate, though in reality she was trembling with nervousness.

"Do as I tell you," reiterated Harry vehemently, her blood now thoroughly up. "Do as I tell you, sir. Here, Dean, help him."

Dean willingly lent the aid of her strong arm, in spite of her mistress's commands; and just as Stephens and Charles re-appeared, the second trunk was triumphantly hoisted on to the fly.

"Now, then, pack in," cried Harry, holding open the door of the fly for the Days and Julia.

Constance, seeing herself beaten in the struggle, and not choosing to fight further with her step-daughters before the servants, retired proudly into the house, without taking any further notice of the Misses Day. And Harry perceived for the first time that Jack was standing by—must have been standing

by for some time, to judge from the angry light in his blue eyes. He raised his hat coldly to Miss Moncrieffe, as he followed his sister indoors; and as Harry stood watching the fly disappearing from sight, she was conscious of a very blank, dreary feeling.

After all, why had she been so eager to fight the Days' battle? They had shut her out most unkindly from their invitation; and what had she gained by defying Constance for their sake? Had not Constance been acting in accordance with what she knew to be her husband's wishes, when she tried to stop Julia's departure? And as she thought of this, Harry felt profoundly miserable. She betook herself disconsolately upstairs; and as she passed the drawing-room door, which was ajar, she heard the sound of hysterical sobbing, and Constance's voice exclaiming,—

"Bruce will be so angry with *me*. He will not understand that it is not my fault."

Still more abashed, Harry proceeded soberly to her room. How long Jack remained with his sister she did not know; but presently the carriage returned to the stable, and when

Harry came down to dinner, she found that Constance was having hers in her own room. So Harry spent the evening by herself, and had ample time to reflect on her own folly.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GHOST OF THE OLD KEEP.

THE following morning Constance made her appearance at breakfast, and she and Harry sat opposite each other in silence, neither caring to address the other. Harry perceived, with a little pang of self-reproach, that her step-mother looked ill and anxious; but doubtless this was partly on her mother's account.

The meal was not a very lively one, and Constance was for a long time the only one to break the silence by asking Harry if she would have some more cream in her tea. There was no touch of displeasure in her voice, but only a little weary ring, and Harry

was touched by it, and blurted out rather awkwardly,—

"I say, Constance, of course I shall tell papa that you were not at all to blame for Julia's going to the Days. It was all her fault and mine."

"My dear," Constance replied, quietly, "it is no use talking about that now. Of course your father will lay part of the blame on me; but perhaps he won't be so very vexed after all."

Harry knew that he would be intensely angry, and though she did not believe he would be so unjust as to blame Constance, she was vexed that the latter should fret herself with the idea that he might do so.

As the ladies were passing down the passage from the breakfast-room they encountered two servants carrying a portmanteau, and followed by Mrs Dean. Constance and Harry both recognised the trunk, but the former would have passed on without taking any notice of it had not the housekeeper stopped and observed,—

"As there is a cart going down to Dunkillie to-day, madam, I am sending Miss Julia's second trunk after her."

The words were not disrespectful, but the manner in which they were spoken was, and Constance felt her blood tingle.

She intended, when Bruce came home, to inform him of the way Mrs Dean had defied her orders yesterday, and beg him again to dismiss her. But it was possible he might again decline to do so, and in that case Constance thought it would be better to have had no previous words with the woman; so she merely replied "Very well," and passed on.

Harry had encouraged Dean to disobey her mistress yesterday, but that had been in the heat of her passion; and now that she was calmer, and half disposed to regret her conduct to Constance, she felt indignant at the barely-concealed insolence of the housekeeper's words and manner. She followed Constance to her boudoir (for since her arrival at Moncrieffe she had gradually dropped her objection to enter the room supposed to belong especially to her step-mother), and stood lolling idly against the window, watching the cold, grey, autumnal mist creeping closer and closer round the castle.

It was not inviting without, nor was it very lively within. Harry felt uncomfortable in her step-mother's presence, yet this boudoir was the warmest and most cheerful room in the house. Presently there was a tap at the door, and Mrs Dean entered to receive her "orders"—a farce gone through daily between her and Constance, for in reality it was she who settled and arranged everything.

Harry had seldom or never been in the room before while these "orders" were being given, but to-day she remained where she was, and watched her old nurse keenly, to see if she could detect any fresh impertinence in her manner to Constance.

"By-the-bye, Mrs Dean," said Constance, just as the housekeeper was about to leave the room, after settling all her "orders" to her own satisfaction, "did that poor Mrs Burns come for the soup I promised her for her little boy, yesterday?"

"She did come, madam."

The housekeeper would never address her new mistress as "Mrs Moncrieffe."

"And you gave her the soup?"

"No, madam."

"No! And why not!"

"I thought you must have made a mistake, madam."

"I told you Mrs Burns would call for some soup, and you had no business to refuse it to her."

"I am sorry, madam; but her husband is a bad character—a poacher—and I know Mr Moncrieffe would not wish to assist him."

"That is my business; yours is to obey me."

"Oh, as you please, madam; but I am an old servant, and I have Mr Moncrieffe's entire confidence."

The insolence of the woman's tone, quiet though it was, was indescribable; and Constance read the covert threat in her voice and eye.

"Send some soup to Mrs Burns, to-day," she said, growing very pale. "Now you may go."

"Very well, madam. But I think you had better not assist those Burnses; ask Miss Moncrieffe if her papa wouldn't be very vexed to hear of your helping them," and Dean looked round at the young lady, evi-

dently expecting her to come to her aid and complete Mrs Moncrieffe's defeat.

But Harry was now as angry with her nurse as she had ever been with her step-mother, and she could not help feeling very sorry for the latter for being thus brow-beaten in her own house.

"My father would wish you to obey your mistress's orders," she said, sharply; and Dean retreated, overcome by amazement, yet determined to let Mrs Moncrieffe see that she yielded at once to Harry, though she would not do so to her.

"I think I must abdicate my position as mistress of the house to you, Harry," said Constance, who was equally surprised by the form which Harry's interference had taken. "Perhaps you could manage her; but the task is altogether beyond *me*."

"How can you put up with her? Is she often like this?" cried the girl hotly. And then she paused in confusion, remembering how she herself had called on Dean to assist in raising Julia's portmanteau on to the fly yesterday.

"She always makes a point of opposing

everything I suggest; and she generally gains her point," said Constance, not bitterly so much as dejectedly.

"Why don't you dismiss her?" exclaimed Harry; and then Constance's look of surprise reminded her that she was giving advice to her enemy.

"Why, Harry, I thought you and I were sworn foes—enemies to the knife," said Constance, half laughing.

"I don't know about enemies," replied Harry, rather confusedly. "Of course, I know I've got an awfully bad temper," she added, defiantly."

"Well, my dear, since you have said it yourself, I won't contradict you," smiled Constance.

"But, of course, I couldn't help being angry with Dean—anyone would have been," said Harry.

"Well, she is an old servant, and you see I can hardly dismiss her without your father's leave."

"Have you asked him?"

"Yes."

"And he refused?"

"Ye—es," replied Constance, reddening.

"He couldn't tell that Dean would speak to you like that—"

"What did she say, Harry? She is careful never to *say* anything that sounds bad when repeated."

"And she was right about the Burnses," added Harry. "Papa would not care to assist them; not because Burns is a poacher, but because he is dishonest in other ways, and he wants him to leave the place. Still I am sure papa would be very angry with Dean. If you like I will tell him about her."

"You have more influence with him than I have."

"No, I have not."

"My dear, you know you have. You need never pretend to be jealous of me, for your father only married me *for sake of you*, and you are far more to him than I shall ever be. I suppose I ought not to say this; but it is the truth, and I tell it you in order that you may understand the immense power you have to make me miserable—if you choose. So far you *have* chosen; but I think that was because you did not understand. You thought your

father cared for me as much, or more than he did for you, and you were—hurt. Well, you need never distress yourself on that score again. When I told your father how disagreeable Dean made herself to me, and that I could not be mistress in my own house while she remained housekeeper, he replied that you and Julia would not like to part from your nurse."

"We did not understand," stammered Harry, all her accustomed glibness of tongue forsaking her. She was staggered by Constance's words, which were all the more impressive for the quiet manner in which they were spoken.

"No, I don't suppose you did," replied Constance. "And now I think we have discussed Mrs Dean quite long enough," she added, lightly.

But Harry could not forget her stepmother's words all the rest of that day, and kept brooding over them, and growing hourly more and more convinced (against her will) that there was a good deal of truth in them. The hardest task for a proud nature is to confess itself in the wrong; but now Harry was almost reduced to confess that her long

struggle against her step-mother's influence had been wrong and unkind. All the summer this idea had been gradually forcing itself upon her, and now she could no longer stifle it, or thrust it from her mind as she used to do. She was very miserable too about Jack; and though he had obtained an extra four days' leave to remain with his mother in her trouble, his departure seemed fearfully near. And once gone, he might never return — or not for years at anyrate.

There was a little more conversation at dinner that night than there had been at breakfast. Harry was quiet and depressed it is true, but Constance, who quite understood what was passing in her step-daughter's mind, exerted herself to talk a little, and the girl did not snub her efforts at conversation, as she had hitherto been in the habit of doing.

The post came in at Moncrieffe shortly before dinner, and to-night Constance had received a very kind letter from her husband, saying he would return to Moncrieffe the following afternoon, and containing the wel-

come news that he had got Frank a post in Mr Clay's house. It was the China branch of the house, and the salary was low to begin with; but it was a good opening; and as Frank was a fine strong lad, it was to be hoped the climate would have no bad effects upon him. The letter furnished food for conversation during the meal, which did not last long, and Harry actually listened to her step-mother's remarks about her brother's prospects without implying, by her looks or manner, that she objected to the sound of their names. And indeed it was not the De Vere boys whom she disliked, so much as Mrs de Vere and Pearl.

After dinner the ladies worked and read till ten o'clock, when Constance rose and said good-night.

"Are you going already?" said Harry. "I can't sleep if I go to bed before eleven."

"I wish you would come and say good-night to me again on your way to bed then," said Constance.

"Why?" asked Harry, in some surprise.

"I am so nervous in that old tower all by myself."

"Oh, there's nothing to be frightened of," replied Harry, in that off-hand tone with which people dispose of the imaginary fears of others.

"Perhaps not; but I am very nervous all the same," answered Constance, colouring. She longed to ask her step-daughter to sleep with her, but did not venture to do so, not knowing how the young lady would take the request. "Have you ever heard about the ghost?" she asked, presently, standing in front of the fire and warming her toes by way of deferring the evil moment of going to bed.

"Oh, yes," laughed the girl carelessly. "It rattles a chain and groans, doesn't it?"

"Harry, do you know I am *certain* I heard it these last two nights that Bruce has been away."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Well, perhaps it is my fancy, but I can't help thinking I hear it in the room over mine, and at the top of those stairs leading into my room. I was frightened once before, when you were at Dinachny, and Bruce had a bolt put on the door for me; but still bolts can't keep out a ghost."

"Why, I do believe you believe in ghosts!" cried Harry, highly amused, and unconscious of tautology.

"Yes, I do," responded Constance, with fervour.

"You do!"

"Yes, I do. But of course you will only laugh at me for saying so. But I don't think you would like to sleep alone in that old tower without a soul near you."

"I shouldn't mind."

"I would have got Eugenie to sleep on my sofa, if she hadn't been in bed with this cold, poor girl."

But Harry did not take the hint, and offer to keep her step-mother company. She had no faith in ghosts, and not being nervous herself, had no conception of the agonies which timid people can suffer from fear. So as it would be a great bore moving into the tower for one night, she held her peace, and suffered Constance to depart alone to the dread chamber.

After her step-mother's departure, Harry sat on musing by the fire till the clock struck eleven, when she rose with a yawn to go to

bed, thinking, for the twentieth time, how strange it was that she and Constance should be on almost friendly terms again, when only yesterday they had been at open war. Constance, on her side, did not set much store by Harry's change of mood. Several times of late the girl had seemed almost on the point of coming to friendly terms with her, and each time she had broken away again, and renewed the war. But to Harry it seemed as if all her old jealous bitterness to her stepmother had died a sudden death. She had no intention of lowering her flag of hostility immediately — she was too proud for that — but she had begun to feel rather sorry for Constance, and resolved not to be disagreeable to her (if she could help it) for the future.

As she stood looking at the clock and yawning, the servant entered with a yellow envelope on a salver, and handed it to her.

"A telegram!" she cried, snatching at it eagerly.

It was addressed to her, so she tore it open, and saw that it was from Julia Day.

"Julia Day!" she muttered, confusedly;

and then the words assumed shape and meaning in her eyes, and she read,—

"I am married before you after all. C. N. and I came to town last night. Edgar been here three weeks; posted names at register—were married to-day."

"Any answer, miss?" asked the servant.

"No, you can go," replied Harry; and then she sank back on her chair, and tried to collect her thoughts.

Julia married to Edgar Day, the man who, only three short weeks before, had proposed to herself, and protested that he never could care for her sister! And if he did not care for her, why had he married her, unless for her money? Ah, of course, that was it! It was Julia's money he wanted. Harry had disliked him before, but now her contempt for him knew no bounds. She saw now why he had prayed her so earnestly to mention his proposal to herself to no one. Of course if it had reached Julia's ears it would have spoilt his game. And his sisters had aided him in his treachery! And—agonising thought!—

she, Harry, had helped her sister on to ruin! For Harry had sufficient sense by this time to see that it was ruin, in a social point of view, to marry Mr Day. And how completely Julia and Carry and Netta had united to deceive and dupe *her*, and keep her in the dark as to their plans, Harry thought. Perhaps it was this, more than anything else, that hurt her so during the first few minutes. She thought nothing of Julia and Netta's deception—it was just like them! But Carry had always been her own particular friend, and Harry felt her faithlessness more keenly than anything else. And this was the girl for whose sake she had finally forfeited Jack's regard, and openly defied her father's wife. Looking back, Harry saw that Carry and Julia had almost always been at the bottom of her feuds with Constance. And now they had both duped her, and left her to bear the brunt of her father's displeasure when he should come home, and learn what had happened. Slowly Harry folded up the paper, and prepared to depart. Should she tell Constance to-night? She must do so some time, and as Constance had asked her to go

and see her, why should she not do so to-night?

Slowly she made her way along the passages towards the tower. Poor Constance! she thought, half pityingly, half contemptuously (the contempt was as she remembered the ghost); after all, she had been right. The Days were *not* nice people, and it was no use mincing the fact.

She had reached the foot of the stairs leading to Constance's room, when a sort of inarticulate cry from above startled her. She ran hastily up, for the cry seemed to proceed from her step-mother's room; but before she was half way up she encountered Constance herself flying down the cold stone stairs, with bare feet, and in her thin night dress—just, in fact, as she had sprung out of bed. She flung her arms wildly round her step-daughter, and clung to her, trembling.

"Oh, Harry!" she gasped, "thank God, you have come at last!"

"What is it?" asked Harry, putting her arm round her reassuringly. "Is it the ghost?" she asked, half amused, yet not unkindly, as Constance seemed unable to

speak. The latter shuddered, and clung closer to her.

"Hush!" she whispered, glancing nervously round.

"Come, you can't stay here, you know," said Harry firmly. "You'll catch your death of cold. Come on—oh, you needn't be afraid with me; I won't let anything hurt you."

Impelled by her step-daughter's strong arm, and stronger will, Constance was led back to her bedroom; and Harry, seeing that she was shivering with cold, made her sit down by the fire, and threw a warm shawl round her. As she was doing this, a low sound like a moan was heard through the room, and Constance started up again, as if about to fly. But Harry forced her back on to her seat, and turned towards the little door beside the bed, from which the sound proceeded. At this minute the chink of chains was distinctly heard on the stairs, and Constance grasped Harry's dress nervously, imploring her not to leave her.

"I must," said Harry, rather impatiently. Her own heart was beating a good deal faster than usual, for the sounds proceeding from the

haunted stairs were unearthly in the extreme; but she told herself that it must be all "rubbish," and walked resolutely up to the haunted door, disregarding Constance's whispered entreaty that she would keep near her. Very softly Harry drew back the bolt, and then suddenly flinging the door wide open, held her candle aloft so as to cast some light on the gloomy flight of steps. Something dark was crouching on them, and setting her candle on a neighbouring chair, the brave girl sprang forward and grasped it boldly. As soon as she touched it, all her vague alarm vanished, and she knew that it was a human being with whom she had to deal—and a human being whose chief object seemed to be to escape. But Harry held her captive firm, and after a sharp struggle, succeeded in dragging her forth to the light. To her surprise and horror she recognised Mrs Dean! The woman looked cowed and frightened, and stood silent for a minute; then she began whiningly,—

"Miss Harry, my dear—"

"Hold your tongue, and leave the room!" cried the young lady peremptorily.

"It was all for *your* sake—all for you and Miss Julia. What did Mr Moncrieffe want with a second wife and other children to rob you of your own, when he had two such sweet young ladies as you and your sister?"

"Leave the room," repeated Harry angrily, and Dean retreated in dismay.

"Now, Constance, you see what your ghost was," said Harry, returning to her step-mother's side.

"Yes—I saw. She wanted to kill me," replied Constance faintly.

Harry knelt beside her, and putting her arm round her, actually kissed her! She felt that her step-mother was still trembling, and thinking the best plan would be to divert her mind from the fright she had just received, took the telegram from her pocket, and prepared to give her a counter-shock.

"Here is something that will put the ghost out of your head," she said, as lightly as she could.

"What is it? A telegram?" cried Constance, in alarm.

"Yes, now do be quiet, Constance, and don't work yourself into a fever. This is from Julia. She is in London with the Days."

"In London! Oh, Harry, what *will* your father say? He comes to-morrow!"

For a minute Harry hesitated whether to finish her story, since Constance seemed so agitated. But she reflected that it is always better to get disagreeable things over, so plunged into her subject at once.

"That's not the worst, Constance," she added. "She's married."

"Married!" screamed Constance.

"Yes, to Edgar Day. It's a most awful shame of Carry, and—oh, I say, Constance, you mustn't take it like that. Indeed it isn't your fault. Oh, no, I'm sure papa can't blame you. I will tell him exactly how it happened myself."

But Constance was not to be pacified. The double shock had been too much for her, and Harry found herself powerless to repair the mischief which her careless announcement had wrought.

. . . . .

When Moncrieffe drove up to his own door the following afternoon, he was struck by the strangely desolate aspect of the castle. Neither of the girls appeared at the door to

welcome him, and there was an air of mystery about Stephens and his subordinates. On the stairs he was met by Mrs de Vere, who looked pale and anxious, and led him into the drawing-room, which was also deserted.

"How are they all? Is anything the matter?" he cried, before Mrs de Vere had shut the door.

"Constance is very ill."

"Constance!"

"Yes, her boy was born this morning. It seems she had a dreadful shock last night."

And then she told him all.

He listened to her in silence, and then muttered something about his "poor Constance," below his breath; and Mrs de Vere was satisfied that he thought more about his wife than his daughter.

He rang the bell, and sent for Dean, whom he ordered to leave the castle that very night; and then he went upstairs with his mother-in-law to get a glimpse of his wife. On the stairs he passed Harry, but he took no notice of her, and she felt the cut all the more keenly because Mrs de Vere was there to witness it.

Ever since her arrival at the castle, Mrs de

Vere had been very cold in her manner to Harry. Jack had told her of the fight between his sister and her step-daughters on Thursday, and she naturally blamed Harry in a great measure for her daughter's illness. She had not attempted to palliate Miss Moncrieffe's conduct when relating what had occurred to her son-in-law, and Moncrieffe was naturally very angry with Harry. But Harry was conscious of having been rather kind to Constance yesterday, and felt herself hardly used.

At dinner no one spoke a word, and Harry was glad when at last Mrs de Vere retired, leaving her alone with her father. She could have borne his anger had no one else been there to witness it, but it galled her sorely that Mrs de Vere should see her in disgrace.

"Papa," she began, as soon as they were alone, "why are you angry with me? *I* was very kind to Constance last night. If it hadn't been for me, I don't know what she would have done."

"If it had not been for you, your sister would not have had the courage to run away in spite of your mother's orders," was the cold reply.

"I did not know she meant to run away."

"Didn't you?"

"No, indeed; or I should have tried to prevent her doing so. Why, only the day before he left Dunkillie, Mr Day proposed to *me*."

"Oh, indeed! I am truly sorry for your sister; and I think, in after years, you will be thankful you did not knowingly promote her marriage with that fellow. But all the same, your conduct was inexcusable. Whatever happens to your sister or Constance will, in a great measure, lie at your door. Ever since my marriage you have done your best to make my wife miserable, but I hardly thought you would so far have forgotten yourself as to call upon her servants to disobey her orders in her very presence. I am greatly disappointed in you, Harry; that is all I can say."

Harry sat silent under this rebuke, unable to speak, and too proud to let her father see the tears in her eyes.

Presently he rose and left the room; and this was the last time that any words passed between them on the subject. Only once that evening Moncrieffe asked to see the letter

which Harry had received from Julia to-day. It was written in high spirits, and the writer seemed to think her marriage a capital joke. She twitted Harry with being the last to marry, and confessed that the young lady whom Miss Trotter had seen down the glen with Mr Day three weeks ago had been herself.

"I put on Pearl's shawl, and took her parasol to avoid detection. Wasn't it a capital plan?" she wrote, evidently with no thought for the consequences her conduct had entailed on Pearl.

Harry had been horrified when she read this, and fully expected some expression of indignation from her father when he read it. But he merely handed her back the letter in silence, and from that day forth said nothing further to her on the subject. And Harry was more hurt by his silence than by any spoken reproaches.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THEY PARTED.

THE following day, Sunday, none of the Dunfern Cottage or Moncrieffe party were in church, as Mrs M'Mickie perceived, with wrath. She had heard the report of Mrs Moncrieffe's illness; but surely that was no reason why the whole of her family should remain away from church.

Sir Charles and Lady de Vere were in their pew, however; and on leaving church Mrs M'Mickie's curiosity prompted her to address them, and inquire for further news from Moncrieffe Castle, though, as a rule, she was very severe on anyone who conversed on mundane matters on the Sabbath. Lady de Vere would

have avoided the old lady if possible, but the latter pounced upon her, and insisted on arresting her on her way to her carriage.

"Good morning, Lady de Vere," she said, planting herself in front of her ladyship. "Have you heard how your niece, Mrs Moncrieffe, is to-day?"

"We stopped at Dunfern Cottage on our way here, and saw Jack and Pearl. They say Constance is about as ill as she can well be, poor thing!"

And then her ladyship again tried to pass on; but the other detained her to ask,—

"What is this report I hear about Julia?"

Lady de Vere glanced round and hesitated. There was a group of the curious standing by, watching them intently.

Mrs M'Mickie marked her look, and said, peremptorily,—

"Come in my carriage as far as our roads lie together. Yours can follow. I want to ask you several things."

The form of invitation was not particularly alluring, and Lady de Vere disliked Mrs M'Mickie exceedingly; but she was burning to tell her of the mistake she had made about

Pearl and Mr Day; so after a moment's hesitation she accepted the proposal, and Sir Charles was too polite to remonstrate, though he was secretly annoyed. So the two Miss Glendowers were put into the Dinachny carriage, while Sir Charles and Lady de Vere, Miss Trotter, and Mrs M'Mickie led the way in the latter's low basket carriage, made to hold four people, facing each other—the driver, Mrs M'Mickie, being on the back seat. As a rule, Mrs M'Mickie never drove on the Sabbath; but to-day she was suffering from a sprained ankle, and being unable to walk far, had consented to use her carriage.

"Why isn't your son with you in church to-day?" she began sharply, as they drove off.

"He hadn't come downstairs when we left home," replied Lady de Vere placidly.

"Hum!" remarked the other. "Not the way to train up a child."

"My dear lady, he is not a child," suggested Sir Charles, bowing, but colouring.

"But he was once, I suppose."

"Possibly," agreed the baronet politely.

"You should have taught him to go to church then."

Lady de Vere was growing very angry, but she was too lazy to show it. She hastened to give Mrs M'Mickie a counter thrust however, in her quiet, easy way.

"By the way, Mrs M'Mickie," she remarked, "I heard a strange piece of news from Pearl to-day."

"Pearl de Vere? And why wasn't *she* in church? She hasn't been there for the last two Sabbaths."

"She is not well, poor child. She has not got over the shock you gave her a little more than three weeks ago."

"What shock?" snappishly.

"Why, you know, that day you attacked her at Moncrieffe about meeting Mr Day unknown to her mother."

"A very improper proceeding!"

"Unfortunately you made a mistake, Mrs M'Mickie. It was Julia Moncrieffe whom you saw with Mr Day."

"It was Patsey," snapped Mrs M'Mickie, colouring.

"Oh, laws!" ejaculated Miss Patsey nervously.

"You have heard of Julia's elopement? Her

sister had a letter from her yesterday, confessing that she had borrowed Pearl's shawl and parasol to avoid detection. Poor little Pearl has been nearly broken-hearted about it."

Lady de Vere had certainly succeeded in completely quenching Mrs M'Mickie. That lady felt not a little uncomfortable as she reflected on the injustice she had done Pearl. She knew full well that, but for her interference, the girl would now have been engaged to Sir Eldred Glendower; whereas now people were saying she would have to work for her bread, unless Sir Charles or the Moncrieffes took her to live with them. She listened to all Lady de Vere had to tell her about the Moncrieffes; and finally inquired,—

"And what's to become of your niece, Pearl. I hear her mother will hardly have enough money to support herself; and, as Bruce Moncrieffe is educating the boys, it's not likely he'll do more. Shall you have Pearl to live with you?"

Lady de Vere had already spoken to her husband on the subject; but she was offended

by the freedom of Mrs M'Mickie's tone, and replied, that really she did not know.

"You ought to, in *my* opinion," said the old lady to Sir Charles.

"It is excessively kind of you to favour us with your opinion, my dear madam," replied the baronet stiffly.

"Do you intend to let her work for her bread?"

"It is a good thing for young people to have to work for their living, sometimes," was the chill response.

Lady de Vere shook her parasol impatiently, and coughed. She wanted Sir Charles to befriend Pearl, but he had not forgiven the family for Frank's mischievous speech at the election, and her ladyship saw that Mrs M'Mickie was doing her best to harden him against his niece. They were in the heat of the discussion, when suddenly the carriage came to a stop—directly in front of the chief inn of the village of Dunfern, through which they were passing. Mrs M'Mickie turned her eyes away from the godless edifice, and administered a sharp touch of the whip to the pony; but it did not stir. Evidently it was accustomed to

stop here, and did not intend to resume its journey yet awhile.

"Dear me—er—really, this is the village inn," remarked the baronet, raising his eyeglass, and surveying the building curiously.

The Dinachny carriage and pair, which was close behind the phaeton, pulled up too, and several persons assembled at their doors to stare at the procession.

"Why are we stopping?" asked her ladyship pettishly. "Why don't you make the pony go on?"

"I can't," gasped Mrs M'Mickie, thrashing away with all her might. The whip, however, got entangled in the harness, and she could not extricate it. Sir Charles offered to take the reins, and she handed them to him in despair. "It's all that Martin," she explained. "He had the charge of the pony, and as I never come through Dunfern—it being out of my way—he was the only one who ever rode the beast this way, and, of course, *he'd* always stop here."

"Do make the pony go on," repeated Lady de Vere fretfully. "Really, it is very dis-

agreeable being stared at like this. I should have thought *your* pony would have been better behaved, Mrs M'Mickie."

"I will smite it with mine staff," said Mrs M'Mickie, as Sir Charles seemed unable to free the whip; and suiting her action to her words, she made a frantic dig at the steed's tail, with the point of her umbrella. The umbrella broke with a loud crash, and the noise, together with the sharp poke, seemed to bear in upon the pony's mind that it was to move on, for it gave a great bound, and then started off at full gallop, followed more leisurely by the other carriage. Lady de Vere and Miss Trotter both screamed wildly, and the Misses Glendower, hearing the cries in front of them, began screaming too.

"Oh! let me out! let me out!" cried Lady de Vere; and standing up she stretched out her arms wildly to her own coachman and footman behind, and called on them piteously to stop the runaway steed. The staid family coachman maintained his gravity admirably; but the young footman could not restrain a smile.

"I shall dismiss that man when I get

home," said her ladyship, resuming her seat. She had knocked her husband's hat over his eyes as she rose, so that the unhappy gentleman could not see where he was going. He could not spare a hand to set his head-piece right, and it slipped gradually forward till at length it fell altogether on to the road, just as his wife resumed her place by his side.

"I wish, Louisa, you would sit still and not scream," he said, testily; but by this time the pony had expended its energy, and allowed him to bring it to a stand-still, just as they reached the road branching off to Drum. Sir Charles resigned the reins, with a sigh, and gratefully accepted his hat from his footman, who was now looking preternaturally grave.

"Really, I am quite ill," said Lady de Vere, as she again found herself in her own carriage. "That is the last time I shall ever trust myself to *your* driving, Sir Charles. Oh, dear! oh! oh! oh! I shall never get over it! You know I have a delicate heart. That odious woman! The little beast ought to be put down." (She was referring to the pony.)

Mrs M'Mickie was in a very bad temper as she drove home. She remarked once that it

was shameful of Sir Charles not to help his sister-in-law in her present trouble; but after that she relapsed into silence, and no one else ventured to speak.

The following morning Mrs M'Mickie again called for her carriage, and set out for Dunfern Cottage by herself, as none of the other ladies would trust themselves to the tender mercies of the pony again. But Mrs M'Mickie was an independent lady, and drove herself to Dunfern with the utmost equanimity. Arrived there, she fastened the pony to the gate, and walked into the house without ceremony. She found Pearl in the dining-room, busy mending an old dress of her mother's, and looking wretchedly ill. The girl was both surprised and annoyed to see who her visitor was, but she received her without betraying her feelings, and asked her quietly to sit down. Then she resumed her work, and waited to hear what Mrs M'Mickie had to say.

"How's your sister?" was the first question, asked in rather a snappish tone.

"Much about the same," replied Pearl languidly.

"Your mother's with her, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone here?"

"No, my brother Jack is with me. But he leaves for his ship on Wednesday."

"And you will be alone then?"

"I suppose so."

"You won't go to Moncrieffe?"

"I think not."

"Miss Moncrieffe wouldn't welcome you, eh?"

Pearl thought enough questions had been asked, so she remained silent, and for a minute neither spoke.

Then Mrs M'Mickie remarked, sharply,—

"I'm glad to see you can do some useful work."

"I have to," replied Pearl quietly.

She did not like Mrs M'Mickie's tone, but was far too depressed to show fight, or to ttempt to silence her. And Mrs M'Mickie, who highly objected to being contradicted, and was equally averse to being pandered to, was *almost* pleased with the girl's manner—as nearly, that is to say, as she ever was pleased with anything.

"What do you say to coming to me as my companion?" she asked so abruptly that Pearl started. "I'd give you one hundred a-year; and you might spend every Saturday with your mother," proceeded the old lady, as the girl seemed too astonished to answer. "I hear it was a mistake about you and Mr Day, and I'm sorry I said anything about it."

"You are very kind," faltered Pearl slowly, "but—"

"Nonsense, you'd better come. I shouldn't think you could afford to throw away one hundred pounds a-year."

This was so true that it silenced Pearl, who had been on the point of declining Mrs M'Mickie's offer. It would be awful to live at Drum; but after all, Pearl reflected, she could not be much more unhappy there than she was at present; and what a boon the hundred pounds would be!

Mrs de Vere had not felt herself justified in declining any offers of help for her children that Moncrieffe might make, and had he offered Pearl a home, she would have raised no objection; but for herself she would take nothing from him. This was

partly from pride, and partly because she was offended with her son-in-law, on Constance's account. She had suspected before their marriage, that the love had been more on Constance's side than his, and that the daughters would have as much, or more, weight in the household than the wife. His manner had been so quiet and undemonstrative to his *fiancée;* but when he spoke of his girls, his whole face had lighted up. Yet the mother had not tried to stop the match, for it had been a great temptation to see Constance so well settled; but now she felt aggrieved with Bruce, fancying that he must have backed his daughters up against their stepmother, else they would surely not have ventured to defy her authority as Jack said they had done; or speak to her with the independent, almost disrespectful tone, which she had sometimes heard them employ. So she would take nothing from Moncrieffe for herself, and it seemed doubtful whether she and Pearl could live on one hundred a-year, especially as Fred and Charlie would spend their holidays at home, and were at an age when boys wear out their clothes with pain-

ful rapidity. For Mrs de Vere insisted on dressing them herself, or rather intended to insist, if Bruce said anything on the subject, though it was possible he might not think of it.

As Pearl sat pondering silently on Mrs M'Mickie's proposal, she saw what an assistance she would be to her mother if she accepted it. Twenty pounds would be quite sufficient for her dress at Mrs M'Mickie's (especially as that lady objected to showy toilettes), and the other eighty could go to her mother. And then, too, she would be near her mother, and could spend one day in the week with her.

"Well?" asked Mrs M'Mickie presently. "I suppose you have come to your senses by this time. As your brother goes on Wednesday you had better come to Drum on that day. It won't be nice for you to stay here all alone."

"But that is the day after to-morrow."

"Well, I suppose you can be ready by then? Good-bye; I shall expect you on Wednesday."

Pearl felt her breath somewhat taken away

by the rapidity of this arrangement; but Mrs M'Mickie was gone before she could remonstrate.

When Jack came home to dinner, he was extremely vexed to hear of the arrangement that had been made.

"You will be miserable with that awful old woman," he said.

"I shall never get a hundred a-year from anyone else."

"That isn't everything. You will never be able to stand her tongue."

"I don't care what she says to me," replied the girl wearily. "I don't feel as if I should mind her, however disagreeable she may be."

And in truth Pearl was just now in that state of apathetic misery, almost amounting to mental coma, when people cease alike to fear and to hope.

That afternoon she walked up to Moncrieffe Castle with Jack, to consult her mother about Mrs M'Mickie's offer. It was a two miles' walk, and she was not strong; but she felt it necessary to see her mother herself. Jack would have tried to persuade Mrs de Vere to put a stop to the whole thing, had

Pearl sent the message through him; so she resolved to go herself, and set out bravely on her walk. She had some difficulty in persuading her mother to accede to her plan; but at last she did so, for, sooth to say, Mrs de Vere was too much occupied with her elder and favourite daughter, to spare much thought for her younger one just now. She knew that Pearl had been unhappy lately, and it seemed to her that a little wholesome work would be the best remedy for the girl. So she agreed, after some demur, and then began to cry about Constance, and seemed to forget all about Pearl's plans. The latter asked her some question about her wardrobe; but she answered almost impatiently that Pearl must attend to her own affairs. Pearl was a little bit hurt; but she told herself that it was natural her mother should be worried about poor Constance; and when Mrs de Vere dismissed her, saying she must return to Constance, kissed her sweetly, and departed at once.

At the hall door the brother and sister encountered Harry, who was returning from a long solitary ramble. She started and coloured

as she caught sight of the young De Veres, and looked rather conscious as she shook hands with them.

"I'm afraid Constance is no better," she said, rather awkwardly, but not disagreeably.

"No," replied Pearl languidly. Her long walk had tired her, and Harry thought her looking excessively ill.

"As I leave on Wednesday, I had better bid you good-bye now, Miss Moncrieffe," said Jack coldly.

"Will you be all alone when your brother goes?" asked Harry, turning hastily to Pearl, and trying to speak indifferently.

"No, on Wednesday I go to Mrs M'Mickie. She has kindly offered to take me as her companion," said Pearl quietly.

"To Mrs M'Mickie!" echoed Harry. She did not like Pearl, and as she saw her standing by her brother's side, she disliked her more than ever, feeling that she had helped to separate them. But still she was sorry to hear she was going to Mrs M'Mickie, and felt that Jack must be thinking that, but for her and Julia's interference, his sister would have found a home at Moncrieffe.

"I'm afraid you won't like Drum," she said, compunctiously.

"It is rather late to think of that now," said Jack coldly. "Good-bye, Miss Moncrieffe."

Their hands touched coldly, and they had parted.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS PATSEY'S LETTER.

IT was the middle of January, and London was empty, as far as fashionable life was concerned. Some benighted beings, however, were left in the desert of brick and mortar even yet, and among these was the Hon. Mrs Greville. It was sorely against her will that she remained in town at this dead season; but her friends had been strangely forgetful of her claims, and just at present she had no invitation to anyone's house. By-and-by she was going to stay with a friend in Leicestershire, but at present she was in a sadly deserted condition. To-day she was in a cheerful humour, however, owing to the visit of her old friend, Sir Eldred Glendower. It was a relief to find some one

else in London too, she said, and she welcomed him warmly, and made him spend the whole afternoon in her drawing-room.

In point of fact the young man had come to her chiefly to obtain news of the Moncrieffes; but she took his visit to herself, and grew quite cheerful as she chatted to him. She told him that Constance was quite strong again now, and that she and Bruce and the baby had gone to Nice for the winter.

"And Harry?" he asked.

"Oh, she was so miserable abroad last winter, that her father thought she had better go to the Fortescues at Brighton."

"So Bruce and his wife are alone?"

"Yes. It must really be a great relief to Constance to be freed from those girls for a little while. I was quite surprised by the change in Harry's manner, by-the-bye. She was quite nice to Constance when they were in London in the end of November — just before they went abroad, you know. And I do believe she is quite fond of the baby. She was quite rude to me, however. I never saw a girl with such a fearful temper. It is really a great misfortune for herself."

Sir Eldred laughed, for well he knew the detestation in which Miss Harry held his hostess.

"Well, it will be a good thing anyway if she and her step-mother become friends," he observed. "I daresay they will, now that that mischief-making little Julia has gone."

"Ah! that was a dreadful affair!" cried Mrs Greville. "Of course, Mr Day only married her for her money."

"He's a bad lot, if the things I heard of him are true. I wonder Moncrieffe did not try to get the marriage set aside, as the girl was under age."

"Well, you see, poor Constance was so dreadfully ill about that time, that Bruce hardly liked to leave her. And then as Julia *had* gone off with Mr Day, he thought it best to let the marriage stand.

"Has he forgiven her?"

"Oh, yes. He went after her as soon as Constance was at all better, and got some sort of settlement made for her money. He threatened to take her away from Mr Day, and declare the marriage illegal, unless he consented to have a settlement made."

"How old was she?"

"Not seventeen. However, I am glad for Constance's sake that she is married."

Sir Eldred had taken a book off the table, and was idly turning it over. It was a handsome edition of "Vanity Fair," and struck him as very like one that Lady de Vere had given to Charlie de Vere while he was staying at Dinachny.

"Is this your book?" he inquired.

"That? Oh, yes; it is one that Maud" (Mrs de Vere) "gave me to read on my journey up to town. By the way, that reminds me," added the little lady hastily, "I had a letter from her this morning."

"And what news does she give? How is she getting on? It was a sad affair about that bank."

"Yes; but she has been very fortunate. Frank has got a good opening in China; and Pearl gets a hundred a-year from Mrs M'Mickie."

"From Mrs M'Mickie!"

"Yes. She has taken Pearl as her companion, and gives her that absurd salary."

Sir Eldred whistled, slowly. "Poor little

girl," he remarked. "She'll have a bad time of it at Drum. Mrs de Vere ought not to let her go."

"She couldn't afford to throw away a hundred a-year."

"Well, I am sorry for her daughter. But how did the old lady come to engage Miss de Vere? I thought she was too horrified by her goings on to have anything to say to her."

"Oh, that was all a mistake. Miss Trotter seems a very foolish person. It was Julia Moncrieffe she saw with Mr Day; not poor Pearl."

"Oh, indeed," said Sir Eldred, colouring somewhat.

"It was an awful shame of Mrs M'Mickie to make such a fuss unless she was quite certain. That poor child was quite heart-broken about it. I remember her brother Jack was inclined to be severe with her about it. Now Julia confesses that she put on Pearl's shawl to divert suspicion from herself. I call it shameful! By-the-bye, Constance asked me to tell you this."

"Constance asked you, did she?"

"Yes; she said you were present when Mrs M'Mickie made her charge—though if the

girl *had* met a lover, I don't see anything to make such a fuss about; though, of course, her mother would have a right to be angry."

After this Sir Eldred became strangely absent and *distrait*, and presently rose to take his leave. His hostess asked him to post a letter for her, and he agreed, readily, though he could not help smiling as he saw that it was not stamped—quite an accidental oversight on Mrs Greville's part of course!

The young man walked slowly back to his rooms, thinking of all Mrs Greville had told him. So Moncrieffe had actually deferred following Julia until his wife was out of danger! And now he had gone abroad with her *alone*. Well, he would be blinder than any bat if he did not in time come to perceive that his wife was worth ten thousand times more than both his daughters put together. And Pearl—poor little Pearl! Sir Eldred pitied her sincerely for being in bondage to Mrs M'Mickie. If it had not been for that good lady's interference, Pearl would probably have been his wife by this time. He gave a half amused smile as he thought of this. He had really been very fond of the girl when he

was with her in the north; but time and absence had considerably cooled his never very ardent affection for her. She was a sweet little creature, and it was very possible that, if he went to Moncrieffe or Dinachny again next summer, "it might come to something between them." Constance evidently wished the match to come about, or she would not have sent him that message through Mrs Greville—ah! by-the-bye, there was that letter of Mrs Greville's. He stamped and posted it, and then went on to his rooms, thinking of other things.

There were several letters waiting him when he got in. One was from his man of business, and after reading it, he took up carelessly a thick epistle, directed in Miss Patsey Trotter's hand. He knew it well, for she often wrote to him at Mrs M'Mickie's dictation. Generally her letters were, to say the least, uninteresting; but to-day Sir Eldred opened the envelope less indifferently than usual, for he was curious to see whether the letter would contain any news of Pearl.

"MY DEAR ELDRED," it began,—"I don't know what you will think of me for writing to

you, and, indeed, I feel that it is not my place to do so. 'Leave other people to manage their own affairs,' my dear mother used to say to me when I was a girl; and I have always kept her words in my mind, and tried to follow them as far as I could. But I can't keep silence any longer now. You may laugh at me, and Jemima" (Mrs M'Mickie), "and Pearl may be angry, but I can't stand by and see a sweet young thing like Pearl de Vere breaking her heart, and still hold my tongue. I don't want to blame anyone, but Pearl has been growing paler and quieter every day since she came here—she was ill enough to look at when she came, poor girl—and until the other day I never guessed what ailed her. And now I feel that as I am partly to blame, I ought to do what I can to set things straight between you. She gets on so nicely with all of us, poor dear, and does everything Jemima tells her, as quietly as possible.

"Sometimes I think that she hasn't the spirit to rebel or make a fuss about anything, and that if she was happier, and took more interest in what went on around her, she wouldn't submit so quietly to Jemima's rule.

Not that I wish to blame Jemima; only she doesn't understand young girls, and won't believe in nerves, and headaches, and those sort of things. She has always been so strong herself, you see, and is accustomed to walk round her farm, even in the coldest weather; and certainly it has agreed very well with her, and with the rest of us.

"I remember, when I was a girl, nothing ever kept me at home but a blinding snowstorm. My poor, dear brother used to say the climate gave me a red nose, and maybe it did; but I'm a strong old woman, a deal stronger than poor Pearl at any rate. I'm afraid the severe weather we have had lately has been too much for her. Jemima says it will brace her up, and declares her constitution has been ruined with coddling; and maybe she's right, for I remember my dear mother used to say that no woman was worth anything unless she could walk well.

"Jemima says it is evident that Mrs de Vere has never accustomed her daughter to take proper exercise, but has allowed her to ruin her health by lolling on easy-chairs, and enervate her mind reading trashy novels. She had an awful yellow-backed thing with

her when she came here first, but Jemima took it out of her hands and threw it into the fire, and since then she has had nothing to read but good, wholesome reading. Not that she reads much, poor thing. She's been six weeks over 'A Walking-staff for the Weak in Faith,' and hasn't got a quarter through it yet. But she reads her Bible in her own room, I've found out; and, as I said to Jemima, there can't be much amiss with a girl who reads her Bible

"But, oh dear me! I'm not making you understand about Pearl one bit. Poor lassie, I went into her room the other night with some liquorice for her cough, which is very bad, and found her crying over a bit of paper, which she dropped in a flurry as I came in, and I picked it up for her, and saw it was a photograph of *you*, though torn across the middle.

"She got as red as red, poor girl, and took it from me quite frightened like. I said to her, 'Pearl, is this the reason you won't marry Mr Macdougal?' for you must know that Mr Macdougal admires Pearl very much, and Jemima thinks she would do well to marry him, for he is a decent man, and

has three hundred a-year and the best manse and garden in the county. But Pearl won't look at him, at which we are all greatly vexed, for we are all very fond of her, as is Jemima, and we would like to have her settled near us. But though Pearl wouldn't say so, I saw at once that this was why she wouldn't have Mr Macdougal. I told Jemima, and she flew out at me, and said I was a fool (which is likely enough true), and that if it hadn't been for my stupidity, you would have married Pearl, but that you had been frightened off by my story about seeing her and Mr Day together down the glen. And so I want to tell you that it was Julia Moncrieffe that I saw with Mr Day. She took Pearl's shawl and parasol on purpose, which was very wrong,—though I should be sorry to say a hard word of her, poor misguided young woman, and maybe she didn't understand that Pearl would break her heart about you in the way she is doing. For she is breaking it, though she was ever so angry with me for saying so. Please don't tell her, or anyone, that I told you all this, for she would never forgive me, she is such a proud little thing. But if it's true you ever liked

her, I hope you won't think any more about that foolish mistake of mine, but come down and see what you can do to cheer her up a bit. I hope you won't take what I have said amiss. I mean the best for you and Pearl, poor lassie, and with best love, I remain, your affectionate cousin, PATSEY TROTTER."

Sir Eldred perused this somewhat confused epistle with a variety of feelings—amusement, impatience, and compassion for Pearl. He was highly indignant when he came to the part referring to Mr Macdougal; and when he laid down the letter, after reading it twice, sat for some time pondering deeply as to what he should do. He did not feel disposed to go to Scotland at this time of year, and indeed he was not quite certain that he cared to marry just yet.

When Mrs Greville had given him her version of the meeting in the glen, it had occurred to him that very probably he would "make it up" with Pearl the next time he met her. But he had felt quite resigned to wait until the following summer for this happy consummation. But Miss Patsey's letter gave a new turn to his feelings.

He was deeply touched by hearing that Pearl still treasured the photo of himself; and he recalled how spiteful Julia had been about it at Dinachny, and felt his old indignant pity revive for Pearl. And then, by a natural sequence, his thoughts reverted to those words which he had spoken on the balcony, and which Pearl could not have misunderstood. As a man of honour, was he not called upon to finish what he had half said then? and if he meant to engage himself, why should he not do so at once? Constance would be pleased; and besides he knew that, since he had read Patsey's letter, he would be constantly haunted by the remembrance that Pearl was unhappy, if he put off going to her until summer. So he resolved to start for the north next morning. Of course he could have written; but he wanted to see for himself, whether Pearl was indeed as ill and unhappy as good Miss Patsey made out. Besides, it would make the girl happier if he went in person. So go he would, and crush Mr Macdougal's pretensions once and for all.

"Confound that fellow!" he added, savagely.

CHAPTER XVI.

A HAPPY CONSUMMATION.

TRUE to his resolve, Sir Eldred set out for Scotland the following morning, without giving himself time to write and warn Mrs M'Mickie of his approach. However, he reflected, this was perhaps as well, as he would in this way take them by surprise at Drum, and see for himself how things were going there. He slept at B—— that night, and the following morning set out again, hoping to reach his destination in a few hours. But, alas! travelling in the Scotch Highlands in mid-winter is a very different thing to taking a Christmas trip in England. A violent snowstorm, accompanied by fierce wind,

had come on during the morning, and before the train had gone very far, it came to a block in the snow, and could neither advance nor return. Fortunately they were not far from assistance here, and after a time a band of workmen appeared to dig them free. Still, it was growing late when they reached Dunkillie, and lights were beginning to appear in the town. Then a new difficulty arose: the mountain roads were all blocked with snow, and no "machine" could go up to Drum. A man had come down on foot during the day, but it would be impossible for anything on wheels to attempt an ascent until the roads had been cleared by a snow plough.

"Well, I must go up on foot then," said the young man resolutely. "I will leave my rugs here, with your permission; but could I get a man to carry my bag for me? It's light enough."

The landlord of the inn, whither he had come in search of a fly, said he would see about getting a man to carry the small portmanteau, and presently returned, saying he had found one.

"He's had a drop too much whisky, I'm

afraid," he said, apologetically, "but that won't matter much on a night like this. And he's strong and will carry your bit thingies easy."

The man thus engaged proved to be no other than Mrs M'Mickie's old gardener, Martin. Sir Eldred was not particularly delighted to find who his escort was to be, but he was thankful to get anyone to accompany him, and after delivering his little portmanteau into Martin's charge, set off, carrying in his own hands his hat box—which is dear to the heart of a male traveller, as her dress box is to a lady.

Martin was in a loquacious mood to-night, and talked volubly until the steepness of the ascent checked his breath. He referred to the cruelty with which Mrs M'Mickie had refused to give him a character, owing to which he had failed to obtain another situation, and was now working on a job as a day labourer in a nursery garden.

"It was all because I wouldna speak up agin Miss Julia Moncrieffe that Mistress M'Mickie wouldna give me a character," he observed, plaintively. "I don't mind telling *you*, sir, that I *did* see Miss Julia down the glen

with a gentleman; but I wasna' gaun to tell on the bonnie lass—not I! Mistress M'Mickie wud a made a pretty wark aboot it if I had. She thinks hersel ain o' the elect, do Mistress M'Mickie (saving your pardon, sir), and privileged to meddle and interfere in all her neighbours' affairs. Ay, but her tail is cockit high."

Here the steepness of the road and roughness of the snow reduced Martin to silence, and for two hours they tramped on without exchanging a word. They had walked for a considerable distance before this steep ascent began, and by the time they caught sight of the lights of Drum, both men were well-nigh exhausted.

"I'm glad we're here at last," muttered the baronet. "I was beginning to wish I'd slept at Dunkillie."

"You'll pay me weel for this job, Sir Eldred," said Martin. "I doot they're all a-bed," he added, as they entered the garden gate.

"Oh, nonsense! I saw a light as we came up the road," said Sir Eldred, ringing loudly at the door bell.

But though he repeated his summons several times, he failed to elicit any response from those within, and began to think Martin must be right.

He was considerably aggravated, for he was cold, and weary, and hungry; and it was anything but pleasant standing on the door-step in the sharp east wind, with the thermometer something below zero, and magnificent icicles depending from his moustache.

At last, just as he was turning away to try and effect an entrance by the back way, the door opened gingerly, and Mr Macdougal presented his face and about a quarter of his person at the aperture, and inquired, in a would-be valorous voice, which, however, sounded suspiciously shaky, who was there. Sir Eldred saw that in one hand he carried a huge stick, and in the other a candle, which, in his nervousness, he held very much askew, thereby allowing the wax to drop down his trousers and on to the stone floor.

"Who is there?" he demanded, desperately, giving a fresh shake to the dripping candle; and before Sir Eldred could regain the door, which he had just quitted to make his way

round the house, Martin stepped in front of him, and replied,—

"It is I, even I, brother-in-the-Lord; and I am cold and hungry, brother-in-the-Lord; and I want ye to give me food and shelter, brother-in-the-Lord."

"Speak up, man; speak up!" whispered a sharp female voice behind the door, while at the same minute Mr Macdougal received a nudge from the invisible fair one that caused him to spill a lot more grease down his legs.

"Go away! go away!" he cried, waving his stick and candle simultaneously in the intruder's face. "We know nothing about you; go away."

"We be Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego," replied Martin glibly; "and we have journeyed from Dan even unto Beersheba—"

"Hold your tongue, sir!" interposed Sir Eldred, as he at last succeeded in dislodging Martin from his position in front of the door. "Don't you know *me*, Mr Macdougal?" he added; but the minister only reiterated his entreaties that he would "go away," and attempted to shut the door in his face.

But to this Sir Eldred objected resolutely;

he was not going to be shut out in the cold any more, so he laid a firm hand on the door, and began to force it open, calling on Mr Macdougal the while to try and recognise him.

"Stand aside, man," cried Mrs M'Mickie, pushing the minister contemptuously aside. "Let us see whether these fellows will dare to enter *my* house, in the face of *me*."

And flinging the door wide open, she boldly faced the men outside, and bid them begone, with a considerable amount of dignity.

"Why, aunt, don't you know me?" laughed Sir Eldred.

"Eldred!" she gasped, bewildered.

"To be sure. I hope you don't mean to make me sleep in the snow."

Mrs M'Mickie stepped back to let him enter, and he stooped and gave her a hearty kiss to assure her of his identity.

"We salute thee, our elect sister, with an holy kiss," murmured Martin, from the background.

And Mrs M'Mickie gave a little gasp, half of anger, half of cold, for Eldred's moustache was a mass of ice, and his embrace could hardly be termed a warm one.

"Send that man away," she said sharply; but her nephew was already paying Martin, and telling him to take himself off.

"Much obliged till ye, sir," said the man, "and may your repose to-night be sweet in the courts o' Sion."

Sir Eldred shut the door sharply in his face, and then proceeded to stamp the snow off his feet and legs, while he relieved himself of his overcoat.

Mrs M'Mickie looked grave as she saw the snow strewn over her floor; but she was too much relieved to see that the intruder was really Sir Eldred, to find much fault.

"What o'clock is it?" asked the young man cheerfully. "I thought you must all be in bed."

"It's only nine o'clock," said his aunt, leading the way back to the dining-room, in a somewhat irate mood.

Here Sir Eldred found the two Miss Glendowers, Miss Trotter, and Pearl de Vere all huddled together like a flock of frightened sheep—at least the three old ladies were holding each other's hands under the supper table, while Pearl sat by the fire, looking as if she

did not much care whether they were all murdered by burglars or not.

Sir Eldred was startled to see how ill she was looking when he first entered; but she coloured brightly when she saw him, and the flush remained on her cheek for the rest of the evening, and imparted an unnatural brightness to the eyes.

The old ladies uttered a simultaneous cry of delight when they saw who the new comer was; and Miss Patsey actually shed tears of delight, at which Mrs M'Mickie rebuked her sharply. Then they all sat down to supper together, and the reason of Sir Eldred's inhospitable reception was explained.

It appeared that Mrs M'Mickie had made herself very unpopular in the neighbourhood by refusing to employ any labourers who did not attend her own church—the Established one—and lately she had dismissed several on this account. Consequently her haystacks had been burnt, and her poultry stolen and poisoned. The other day, too, she had overheard her solemn butler using profane language to the decorous housemaid, who was paying him back in kind, and she had dis-

missed them both on the spot, and insisted on their leaving her house at once.

The man had used some ugly threats in departing, and to-night, when the loud ringing and knocking was heard, it gave a shock to the whole household. One of the maids had peeped out of an upper window, and recognised Martin by the starlight; and mistaking the long staff he carried for a gun, had flown down to her mistress and informed her that Martin, and a lot of other men, armed with guns, were outside. In this emergency, Mr Macdougal, who was supping at Drum, was sent out to parley with the marauders, though, as Mrs M'Mickie contemptuously remarked, any servant lass would have been more efficacious. This was unkind, especially as Miss de Vere was in the room; and Sir Eldred was half amused, and half indignant, at the piteous glance which the minister cast at the young girl. But Pearl was bending over her work beside the fire (she said she was not hungry, and did not want supper), and seemed unconscious of all that was passing around her. She heard Mrs M'Mickie ask Sir Eldred what had brought him down here so suddenly, how-

ever, and her heart beat faster as she listened for his reply.

"Some business, of which I will inform you when we are alone," he replied, carelessly; and Pearl told herself she was a fool to fancy for a minute that he had come to see her. She caught Miss Trotter's eyes glancing complacently from her to Sir Eldred, and an agonising idea occurred to her—supposing the kind-hearted, but stupid little woman were to say anything to him about her—Pearl! The poor girl grew sick with horror at the mere idea, and it was with great difficulty that she continued to stitch calmly on without betraying her emotion. Had Sir Eldred heard who it was that had been with Mr Day down the glen? she wondered; or did he still think of her as a false little flirt? He neither looked at nor spoke to her, for, in truth, he felt rather shy about addressing her; and she concluded that he still thought ill of her. And certainly he had a right to do so, if he believed that, at the very time she was encouraging his advances, she was having clandestine meetings with another lover. Poor girl, she had thought herself miserable enough when it seemed as if

she was never to see Sir Eldred again; but now she found it ten times worse to sit in the same room with him, when he would not even look at her. At last supper was over; at last! and the servants who had not been dismissed came in to prayers. These lasted some time, and afterwards they all drew their chairs round the fire, for no one could go to bed before half-past ten at Drum (nor sit up later for that matter), and as yet it was only ten.

"You sit there, Mr Macdougal," said Mrs M'Mickie, pointing to a seat beside Pearl. The minister gladly availed himself of it, and began to whisper sweet nothings into the girl's ear.

"Why don't you answer Mr Macdougal when he speaks to you?" snapped Mrs M'Mickie presently, seeing that Pearl was not responding very cordially to the minister's advances. The girl started at the abrupt address, and flushed crimson as she felt all eyes, Sir Eldred's among the rest, fixed upon her.

"I—I don't feel very we—I am very tired to-night," she said, rising in desperation. "May I go to bed, Mrs M'Mickie, please?"

"Oh, very well! You'd like to lie in bed all the day round, I do believe," was the ungracious response.

But Pearl was only too thankful for permission to retire, and cared little how the concession was worded. She murmured a sort of general good-night to the company, but was obliged to shake hands with Mr Macdougal, who insisted on opening the door for her, and lighting her bedroom candle.

"How ill Miss de Vere is looking," remarked Sir Eldred, after the girl had retired. He had watched Mr Macdougal's gallantry with increasing irritation, and felt vexed that she had not shaken hands with himself.

"I thought her looking better to-night than usual," remarked Miss Glendower. "She was flushed, as she so often is at night."

"Ay, she looks pretty when she's flushed," remarked Miss Trotter. "Don't you think so, Eldred?"

"When does Miss de Vere *not* look divine?" murmured Mr Macdougal; which silenced Sir Eldred.

"She's a little petted thing," sniffed Mrs M'Mickie. "When *I* was a girl I had always

a good healthy appetite for my meals; but Pearl won't eat, and then complains of want of strength."

"She's a sweet young thing anyhow," persisted Miss Trotter, glancing towards the baronet.

"Sweeter than honey in the honey-comb!" added Mr Macdougal, shaking his head.

Sir Eldred gave him a look which ought to have annihilated him on the spot; and Mrs M'Mickie observed, pleasantly,—

"She just went to bed to avoid *you*, Mr Macdougal. *I* saw through her lies fast enough. It's a pity you think her so sweet, for she dislikes *you* worse than poison."

Poor Mr Macdougal turned purple at this unfeeling speech, and rising hastily he took his leave.

"Don't go yet, man," said Mrs M'Mickie. "Keep your seat and your temper. *I'll* stand your friend with that little, affected baggage, that you've set your heart on; I promise you."

But the minister was not to be pacified, and departed at once.

"He shall not marry Pearl!" said Mrs M'Mickie, shutting her lips with an ominous

snap as the minister departed. "It is evident to me that he is possessed of an evil temper."

"Does the old lady really consider that the girl is her property, to dispose of as she pleases?" wondered Sir Eldred indignantly. He was, however, relieved that she had renounced her intention of marrying Pearl to Mr Macdougal. He was very tired that night, and slept profoundly; but before he went to sleep he heard a dry, sharp cough in the next room, and recognised it as Pearl's. In the night he awoke, and again he heard the same cough. Was it possible that the girl had been coughing all this while? he wondered; and for several minutes he kept his sleepy eyes open, and listened to that little, short cough. The next morning when he awoke, he listened for it again, but did not hear it. Apparently the fit had exhausted itself for the present.

Sir Eldred knew the habits of Drum well. Prayers at eight, and breakfast at nine. It was a deadly offence to be late for prayers, so, weary though he was, the young man dragged himself out of bed, for he had a particular reason for wishing to keep in his aunt's good graces just at present. This was Sunday, and every-

one at Drum looked unhappy on the Sabbath. Prayers had not commenced when Sir Eldred entered the dining-room, but everyone was assembled, and Mrs M'Mickie remarked,—"I thought you meant to be late, Eldred Glendower. Ring for the maids, Patsey."

Sir Eldred made his way over to where Pearl was sitting, looking white and wan, for she had slept little, and cried and coughed a good deal, during the night. The young man was touched by her appearance, and it seemed to him that there was something very pathetic about her eyes. She certainly looked much worse in the cold morning light than she had done the previous night, and the greeting she accorded Sir Eldred was listless and almost lifeless.

"The Scotch winter doesn't seem to agree with you," he began, gravely, after he had shaken hands with her. "I heard you coughing a great deal last night."

"I hope I did not disturb you?" she replied, languidly. "My room is next to yours."

"Oh, no; I slept like a top. But I am sorry to see you looking so ill."

She made no reply, and just then the servants came in and prayers began. After they were

over there was still some delay before breakfast appeared, and then it was not very tempting, consisting of huge plates of porridge for the ladies, and some weak tea and bread and butter for Sir Eldred. He made a wry face as he took his seat, but being hungry contrived to make a tolerable repast.

"You'll have eggs or something to-morrow," remarked Mrs M'Mickie; "but I have no extra cooking done on the Sabbath."

"Oh, this will do all right," replied Sir Eldred, resolving not to remain at Drum a day longer than he could help. He glanced across the table at Pearl, who was sitting opposite, and saw that she had laid down her spoon already. She had nibbled for a minute or two at her porridge, but could make no way with it, though she felt faint from waiting so long for her breakfast.

"What's the matter with your porridge? isn't it good?" snapped Mrs M'Mickie.

"I'm not hungry," was the faint response.

"Not hungry! when *I* was a girl, Pearl de Vere, I'd have had my porridge kept cold for my dinner, if I hadn't finished it at breakfast. It's a sin to waste good food."

"I'm very sorry," replied Pearl wearily.

"Well, eat up your porridge then."

"I can't."

"Can't!" Mrs M'Mickie said no more; but she looked ominous.

"I daresay Miss de Vere would like some tea," suggested Sir Eldred, rising. "Let me ring for another cup."

"Oh, no, please," expostulated Pearl. She would dearly have liked the tea, but dared not say so.

"Sit down, and mind your own business, Eldred Glendower," said Mrs M'Mickie sharply. "I give Pearl everything she requires."

After this, no more was said till breakfast was over; after which they all retired to get ready for church. Sir Eldred, of course, accompanied them, and for an hour and a-half, listened to Mr Macdougal's droning Scotch voice, though without taking in the meaning of the drone it is to be feared. It was bitterly cold outside, and inside the little church was close and hot to suffocation. Sir Eldred saw Pearl change colour, and feeling the air oppressive, and the service fatiguing himself, he could quite understand that it would be still more so

to Pearl. When they left church, the sharp air set her coughing again, and Sir Eldred was surprised to find how anxiously he was watching her. Mrs de Vere was in church too, but she merely smiled and nodded to her daughter as she passed, for Mrs M'Mickie objected to persons talking in a friendly way on the Sabbath. By going round through Dunfern, you could also arrive at Drum (though this added more than a mile to the length of the walk), and Sir Eldred suggested to Pearl that he and she should accompany her mother home, and return to Drum the longer way. But Pearl shook her head, and whispered that Mrs M'Mickie would object. She was surprised and fluttered by his manner; it was so kind, and almost deprecating, as though he would be glad to make friends with her again. Presently, seeing that she looked tired, he made her take his arm, and cold though it was, he moderated his pace to hers. Old Miss Glendower kept by their side, gazing benevolently at Pearl, and remarking that the long service *was* trying; while Sir Eldred voted her the greatest nuisance going, and wished she would have the sense to leave him and Pearl to themselves.

She stuck resolutely to them, however, until they reached Drum, where they spent the hour which intervened between their return and dinner time, reading in the drawing-room. The old ladies all sat round the room in a semi-circle, for Mrs M'Mickie disapproved of persons toasting their feet at the fire. So the company were fain to content themselves with gazing at the warm blaze from a respectful distance. Sir Eldred alone stood on the rug, with his back to the fire; but then he was a privileged person. It was a relief to all when dinner was announced, though it was not a very inviting meal when it did appear, consisting merely of cold meat, potatoes, bread, and cheese, for nothing was cooked, that could possibly be helped, on the Sabbath. Again Pearl's appetite failed, at sight of the huge, untempting slice of mutton which Mrs M'Mickie placed on her plate, and after trying to play at eating for a minute or two, she laid down her knife and fork softly, hoping to escape detection. But this was not to be. Mrs M'Mickie's own knife and fork were instantly laid down too, and Mrs M'Mickie's sharp little eyes fixed severely on the delinquent.

"So you are going without your dinner too, are you?" she inquired, with more than usual tartness, for she was beginning to grow really anxious about the girl, though she did not choose to say so. "You must be pretty saucy to find any fault with that mutton."

"Indeed, it isn't that; but I'm not hungry."

"How can you help being hungry when you ate no breakfast? It's just sauciness—that's what it is."

To this there was no reply, and the irate lady continued,—"No wonder you're so pale and whiney-piney, when you eat nothing. I should be ill myself at that rate. Look at that beautiful piece of mutton, does it not cry aloud and reproach you for wasting it? But I'd have you to know, Pearl de Vere, that that piece of mutton will rise up in judgment and condemn you."

Pearl bent her head, and made no reply, but there were evidently tears in her eyes, and Mrs M'Mickie thought it well to drop the argument and go on with her own dinner. Sir Eldred's indignation was great, and the sight of Pearl's tears nearly made him burst into open rebellion. But he restrained himself, re-

flecting that, for Pearl's sake, he must not offend his aunt.

After the cheerless meal they all returned to their old places in the drawing-room. Sir Eldred was longing for an opportunity of speaking to Pearl, but it was evident that he would not get one to-day. The girl was seated on a stiff, high-backed chair, and looked weary enough. Sir Eldred seated himself beside her, and tried to carry on a low-toned conversation; but Mrs M'Mickie observed that she would have no "conversation of the Devil" in *her* house on the Sabbath, and so the young man was reduced to silence. He soon grew weary of sitting in the drawing-room, and at last put on his hat and went out. He walked straight to Dunfern Cottage, and informed Mrs de Vere of the reason which had brought him to this part of the country, and received her warm encouragement of his suit.

"How ill Pear—Miss de Vere is looking," he remarked.

"Yes, poor child. I want her to come home; and I think she'll have to soon. Mrs M'Mickie forces her to walk in all weathers, by way of hardening her, as she calls it, and she

won't even give her a fire in her room thoug. the weather is so severe, and she has such a bad cough."

"She mustn't stay at Drum another week, or they'll kill her outright," said the young man resolutely; and he returned to Drum, resolved to speak to Mrs M'Mickie that very evening, if he could not see Pearl first. He found the party at Drum all seated exactly as he had left them. Apparently no one had moved, though now two of the old ladies were nodding behind their books.

"Aunt Jemima, can I speak to you alone?" he began. "I have something I particularly want to say to you."

"Is it on worldly matters that you would speak, Eldred Glendower? Because if so, I would advise you to wait till to-morrow," was the grim response.

"Oh, hang it!" muttered Sir Eldred *sotto voce*, as he flung himself impatiently into a chair. He followed the example of the old ladies, and went to sleep till tea time; after which they all went to church, with the exception of Pearl, who was excused (for the first time since her arrival at Drum), on the score of

her cough. Sir Eldred would fain have stayed with her, but Mrs M'Mickie would not allow this, so he had to tramp off to church, in a very unchristian frame of mind.

The following morning, when breakfast was over, Mrs M'Mickie waited till everyone else had left the dining-room, except her nephew; and then shutting the door she confronted him and began,—

"Now, Eldred, you can tell me the reason why you came here like a thief in the night, at this untimely season of the year. But first let me warn you, that if you have got into debt, you'll get no aid from *me*."

"I'm not in debt, aunt. I came here to ask Miss de Vere to be my wife; but as there seems no chance of my ever seeing her alone, I thought the best thing I could do would be to ask you to let me see her by herself."

"So you want to marry Pearl, do you? She's a petted little thing; but not so bad, as girls go. I am glad, since she's to be your wife, that I have had the opportunity of rooting some of the tares out of her heart. She wants a deal of pruning yet, however."

"Will you let me see her alone?" interposed

the young man impatiently. "If she accepts me, I should like to marry her as soon as possible. Only I suppose it will be rather a shame to rob you of your companion so suddenly."

"What do *I* want with a companion? I only took the girl out of charity; and I'm sure I shall be glad to be rid of her again. She's done nothing but pine since she came here (though I'm bound to say she has made no complaints), and I was seriously beginning to think of sending her back to her mother. If she'd been taken ill, Mrs de Vere would have laid all the blame on *me*, of course."

"I must marry her at once, and take her to a warmer climate."

"Warmer humbug!"

"And aunt, don't you think that, while she remains here, you might give her a fire in her room, and—"

"I'll have no pandering to the flesh in *my* house. However, if you and she agree to make fools of yourselves, she may go to her mother's, and you can coddle her up as much as you like *there*."

With this the lady marched out of the

room, bidding her nephew to wait, and going over to the drawing-room, she said, sharply,—

"Pearl de Vere, Sir Eldred is waiting to speak to you in the dining-room. Do you hear? go to him at once!"

Miss Patsey gave a delighted little cry, and Pearl grew crimson. She laid down her work quietly, and crossed over to the dining-room, trembling, and wondering what he could have to say to her.

"Mrs M'Mickie said you wished to speak to me," she said, faintly, and growing suddenly pale, as she found herself in his presence.

"I think you know what I have to say, Pearl," he said, taking her hand, and drawing her gently to him. "It was only the wish to see you, and ask you with my own lips to be my dear little wife, that could have brought me down here just now."

She did not answer. The happiness was too sudden and unexpected for her fully to realise it, coming, as it did, after such long, weary months of hopeless unhappiness and despair. There was a loud beating in her ears, and a choking in her throat, which prevented her alike from hearing or speaking;

but he read her silence aright, and as he stooped to press his betrothal kiss on the little pale, sweet face, he wondered how he could ever have dreamt of putting off this moment till next summer.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONSTANCE'S REWARD.

AND now we have, I think, disposed satisfactorily of our heroes and heroines. We will, therefore, leave them for the present, and content ourselves with a brief peep at them some ten years later on.

It was a fine August afternoon, a few days before the mighty Twelfth, and already guests were beginning to assemble at Moncrieffe Castle in anticipation of this anniversary. Amongst these are Mr and Mrs Edgar Day, and their six children, and also Sir Eldred and Lady Glendower, with their little boy and girl. It is a pretty sight to see the large party of children romping in the park. There are

eleven of them altogether, for besides the Glendowers and Days, there are the three little Moncrieffes—two fine boys of nine and eight, and a blue-eyed little maiden of four, named Effie. Just now they are all under the charge of Harry, who adores children, and is adored in turn by them.

Miss Moncrieffe is eight-and-twenty now, and people say she will never marry, because she is so saucy. In appearance she is as handsome as ever, and she looks very picturesque seated on the grass, and crowned with ox-eyed daisies, which the little ones have woven into a wreath for her. At least, so thinks the gentleman who is standing on the balcony outside the drawing-room window, and surveying the scene, with a half smile. But then, as he is our old friend Jack de Vere, this is no wonder, for he always admired Harry, even in the days when he was most angry with her. He is a bearded man of two-and-thirty now, but he still retains his old boyish, hearty manner, and cheery smile. A great change has come over his prospects during the last ten years, for poor Josh de Vere is dead, and Jack is now heir-at-law to his uncle, Sir Charles.

The old baronet's health has been failing fast since his son's death, and now he is quite bedridden. Jack only arrived at Moncrieffe yesterday, and to-day he has seen his uncle for the first time since he left home, ten years ago. He has just been telling his sister, Pearl, who is seated by the window, and is the only other occupant of the room, about his visit to Dinachny.

"And so the old gentleman knew you?" said Pearl. "Did he seem pleased to see you?"

"He didn't seem to care much. He's never taken interest in anything since Josh died; at least so Aunt Fanny told me."

"Aunt Fanny! Is she there?"

"Yes; arrived the other day. Wants to recall herself to her brother's memory before he makes his will, I expect," laughed Jack.

"I'm afraid she won't do herself much good in that way. Aunt Louie told me that nothing will induce him to make a will. Since Josh is dead, he says he doesn't care who has his money. But Aunt Fanny thinks she can always make people do as she wishes. She thought the same about Mrs M'Mickie," and Lady Glendower laughed quietly

Mrs M'Mickie died three years ago, leaving the whole of her savings, amounting to two hundred thousand pounds, to her nephew, Sir Eldred. People were surprised that she had

not accumulated more, for she could never shake off the effects of her early and frugal training, and bring herself to spend more than eight hundred or a thousand a-year. The rest of her income had been steadily accumulating for the last thirty or forty years, and it was known that her ambition was to raise her family (of which Sir Eldred was the head) from its present poverty to its original wealth. She had not even made Sir Eldred an allowance on his marriage, and for seven years he and his wife had been rather badly off, and had been forced to let Gwendale permanently. Yet when the old lady died of apoplexy, brought on by some sudden excitement (it was the *timper*, Martin, the ex-gardener declared. She was bound to die of it some day), it was found that her savings only amounted to two hundred thousand pounds. This, however, was sufficient to place the young Glendowers in easy circumstances, and had raised their income to over nine thousand a-year.

The rest of her money Mrs M'Mickie left to various charities, and to some distant relations of the late Mr Bland's.

Her own savings, she conceived, she had a right to do as she pleased with; but she thought that money which had been made by her husband ought to remain in *his* family.

So, as she disliked both Harry Moncrieffe and Mrs Day, she ferreted out some distant Bland cousins, and left the money to them. To her sisters and Miss Trotter she left four hundred a-year each, for their lives, to revert to the Bland cousins on their death. The old ladies still continued to reside at Drum, and seemed much happier than in the days of Mrs M'Mickie's reign.

Certainly matrimony has agreed with Lady Glendower. One could hardly recognise the pale, spiritless girl whom Sir Eldred rescued from Drum ten years ago, in the dainty little lady reclining on an easy-chair by the window, in the most bewitching of summer toilettes. People say that Sir Eldred spoils his lovely little wife; and certainly she is the master-spirit of the two, and considers herself sorely aggrieved if she fails to get her own way in every single thing. Fortunately, however, she is still very much in love with her husband, and graciously considers his wishes to a certain extent, when forming any new plan. Constance is completely astounded by the masterful spirit which her gentle little sister has developed since her marriage; however, Sir Eldred seems quite content with his thraldom, so no one can find fault. It is such a comfort to have all one's plans settled for one, the baronet is wont to observe. "Saves one

the trouble of making up one's mind you know."

"By Jove! that was a rum will of Mrs M'Mickie's," continued Jack. "What a rage Harry and Julia must have been in!"

"Oh, I don't think Harry cared. She doesn't care for money, and her own is accumulating for her all this while, for her father won't let her spend it. But the Days were in a tremendous rage (here Lady Glendower laughed, softly). They are both extravagant, and have all those children, and two thousand a-year won't do everything."

"I shouldn't think Constance found them very pleasant visitors."

"Oh, as for that, Julia has grown quite fawning lately," returned the little lady, with a contemptuous shrug. "She sees that Constance is the real mistress of this house at last; and though I'm sure she hates her, she has the sense to treat her civilly."

"How do the Days get on together? It struck me last night that they were rather inclined to squabble."

"They only squabble when they are here. When they are at home, I believe it comes to open fighting. Julia is old enough now to see what a *mésalliance* she made!"

"And doesn't hesitate to tell Day so, I'll be

bound. He's a horrid fellow; but, upon my word, I think she's worse."

"Well, so do I. For one thing, I dislike her more. She was very ill-natured to me before I married, and I used to dislike her almost more than Harry."

"You disliked Harry enough," said Jack, with rather an unpleasant laugh.

"Well, I had good cause to," replied her ladyship, pouting. "And, to tell the truth, she and I dislike each other still; only, for Constance's sake, we abstain from open warfare."

"Constance wrote to me that she gets on capitally with Miss Moncrieffe now."

"Oh, well, you see, Harry is a woman of the world now, and sees things in their proper light. No one could go on hating Constance for ever, unless they were altogether horrid, like Mrs Day. Constance says that Julia and the Misses Day made mischief between her and Harry, but of course Harry is too old for that sort of thing now."

"How well Moncrieffe seems to have behaved about the Days altogether."

"Yes; since Julia *is* married, he thinks all he can do is to make the best of them. He has had the Misses Day staying here actually. Harry could see almost as much of them as she likes now; but for that very reason, I sup-

pose, her affection for them seems to have died a violent death."

"The usual way with young ladies' school friendships, isn't it?" laughed Jack. "I say, Mrs Pearl, just look at your daughter. She is running away with Miss Moncrieffe's hat."

"Harry is certainly very nice to the children, to give her her due," said Pearl. "I believe Bertie was the great peace-maker between her and Constance. Harry never seemed in the least jealous of him, though of course he displaced her and Julia from their position of Bruce's heirs. I believe it was over him that she and Constance first made friends."

"I wonder Miss Moncrieffe has not married," remarked Jack meditatively. "With her money and good looks it seems as if she ought to have done so."

"Well, you see, opinion is divided as to her looks. Many people don't admire her at all," replied Lady Glendower, raising her head slightly. "I daresay, however, she could have married if she hadn't been so saucy. And then she has such a temper, that I should think most men would be afraid to marry her."

Jack frowned slightly, but said nothing; and just then Mrs Moncrieffe appeared behind her sister, and inquired who had a bad temper.

"You should not talk like that, with the door open," she added, tapping her sister's cheek playfully.

Constance has not changed much in outward appearance since we last saw her. It is her manner which is slightly cold and self-contained, and forms such a strong contrast to her younger sister's vivacity. People are divided in their admiration for the two sisters. Mrs Moncrieffe is taller; more dignified; and in some ways handsomer; but many people think her cold, and prefer the winning, though less regular beauty of Lady Glendower.

"Oh, we were only speaking of Harry," returned Pearl carelessly.

"Well, I never feel the effects of her temper now, at all events," said Constance, rather reprovingly. "Harry is a very kind step-daughter to me now; and the sweetest elder sister in the world to my chicks."

"Oh, I'm not going to stay here to hear Harry's praises sung," cried Lady Glendower, springing up, with a pretty little *moue;* and running down the balcony steps she joined the juvenile party on the lawn, and presently appeared chatting amicably to her old enemy, Harry.

"They seem to get on pretty well," laughed Jack, watching them.

"Oh, yes, they are perfect friends and all

that now ; but they will never like each other much, I'm afraid. However, that doesn't matter, so long as they get on amicably while they are staying in the same house. Harry has changed so wonderfully, Jack."

"Has she?"

"Well, not exactly changed, perhaps. She always had a good heart, and she is still quick tempered and impulsive ; but she is larger minded, and more sensible now. I am very fond of her."

"I expected she would be married by this time."

"No, Jack, she could have married over and over again had she chosen — but she did not."

"Saucy?" suggested Jack, laughing, and ignoring the significance in his sister's tone.

"She would not marry anyone she did not care for ; and she is not a girl to love lightly. With her, to love once, is to love always."

Jack made no reply, but began to whistle lightly, and just then the entrance of Mrs Day stopped the subject. Though only seven-and-twenty, Julia Day looked faded and *passée*. There were lines of care across her forehead, and peevish curves round her mouth. She and her husband had not really cared for one another even when they first married. Harry was the sister whom Mr Day really

admired, and he had taken Julia merely for her money; while she had run away with him not so much because she loved him, as from a school-girlish love of romance, and the idea that it would be a feather in her cap to be married before Harry or Pearl, who had always attracted so much more admiration than herself. But as she grew older, and her ideas enlarged, she began to think it a mistake to marry at sixteen.

Her husband had a violent temper, and a large family, and the pressure of debt did not improve it; and now Julia almost envied her sister, and would gladly have changed places with her, though she regarded Harry as a confirmed old maid. But surely it was better to be a rich old maid like Harry (or rather as Harry would be some day, for she was hardly one yet), than to be the slave of a bad-tempered husband, and a whole half-dozen children. Mrs Day's face assumed a more than usually fretful expression as she joined the brother and sister on the balcony, and caught sight of the little ones below.

"Dear me, how can Pearl and Harry make such slaves of themselves to those children," she remarked. "What a lot of them—eleven; and more than half of them are mine. Why, I have more than you and Pearl put together!"

She spoke as if she would like to drown all of hers like puppies in a bucket, Jack thought, in disgust.

He left her and Constance to entertain one another, and left the room. Presently he emerged from the door, and made his way to where Harry and little Effie were seated on the grass, the other children having just been carried off by their nurses. Effie, however, had managed to hide behind Harry, and the latter had pacified the head nurse by promising to bring her in in a few minutes. Just now the little one had scratched her finger with a pin, and was lifting up her small voice and weeping. Harry had taken the child in her arms and was soothing her fondly as Jack came up to her. She had not heard his steps on the grass, and was not aware of his presence till he was standing beside her. Then she set down the little girl, and rising defiantly, prepared to lead her away.

"Now, Effie must be a good girl, and not cry," she said, kindly but firmly.

All the tenderness had left her manner, and it was almost defiant. Jack smiled; it was so like the Harry of old. She always used to make herself out worse than she was. There was no trying for effect with her at anyrate. He had seen how gentle she could really be to her little sister; but she evidently

did not choose him to think that she was making a display of her amiability for his benefit.

. . . . . .

It was about a week after this that Jack came up to his elder sister, as she was standing alone in her boudoir after dinner, to ask for the loan of a pencil and piece of paper.

"Harry has been repeating some capital verses," he said, and she has promised to write them down for me. "I'd awful work to get her to promise, so I want to keep her up to the mark now she has consented."

Constance smiled.

"You and Harry seem better friends than you were when you first came here," she said.

"Oh, it was Miss Harry who wouldn't have anything to say to me when I first arrived. I was always ready to be friendly with her. I say, you know, she's a good deal improved, don't you think?"

"She always was a fine girl, but she was prejudiced and misguided. I should like nothing better than to see her your wife now, Jack."

"Oh!" said Jack, almost coldly, "a fellow doesn't care to marry a girl who is at daggers drawn with his people!"

"She is not now, Jack."

"Oh, well, I don't suppose she'd look at me now. She always was disposed to be insolent."

"She could not be insolent to you now. Poor Josh's death puts you quite on a level with her. And—I'm sure it is the memory of that old affair between you that has kept her from marrying anyone else."

Constance felt that she was making a deperate stroke when she said this, but though Jack coloured, he did not either scoff or look offended.

"Do you really think that, Constance?" he asked, gravely.

"I am *sure* of it," she replied, impressively. "See, there is Harry in the garden. Go to her, Jack."

He left the room, pretending to laugh, but in reality more touched than he cared to show; and Constance, after a few minutes, went upstairs to pay her usual visit to the nursery. She bent over the little cribs, and kissed their occupants tenderly, and then, seated on little Effie's bed, hushed the child gently, till it fell asleep. And still she sat on, thinking of her words to Jack, and wondering if they would bear any fruit. Through the window she could see several of the party strolling up and down on the lawn, enjoying the fresh evening

air. There were Pearl and Eldred—of course, they were inseparable; and there was poor old Bruce sitting by himself, and no doubt wondering where *his* wife was. How grey his hair had turned—and no wonder, for he was fifty now. But that iron-grey hair suited him well, his friends said. Constance rose, and stood by the window, with a sigh. Yes, Bruce was evidently looking about for her, as he smoked his cigar. There could be no doubt as to his affection for her *now*. She was dearer to him than any other creature in the world; and he loved her children as much as he had ever loved his two elder girls. Nor did any doubt as to his wife's entire affection for himself ever cross his mind. He was supremely proud and fond of her, and he supposed that she was equally devoted to himself. Indeed, in common with all the world, he regarded her as a supremely happy and fortunate woman. Yet, perhaps, he would have felt less confident on this point could he have seen the sad light in her deep eyes, as they rested on him now.

"Poor Bruce," she murmured, softly; and then the old proverb recurred to her: "He who will not when he may, when he will, he shall have nay."

"I *could* have loved him—I could have loved him once, when we first married," she thought. "Now, I am fond of him, poor old

fellow — but it is quite a different thing. After all, if it satisfies him, where is the difference?" she muttered, presently. "If he can take the meretricious coin for true gold, it answers the purpose just as well." And she gave a low, strange laugh. No, it was she alone who knew the secrets of her own heart; and she alone who suffered from them. Pearl was happy, and so was Eldred. He had come to love his sweet little wife as truly as he ever loved— Well, where was the harm of acknowledging it now? Now that it was all past and gone such long, long years ago. Constance could not help shuddering as she looked back and saw the danger she had passed through; and she knew that, though she had escaped its worst consequences, she had not come through it scathless. People called her cold; and she knew that she *was* cold to all save a few whom she loved. Yet she had not been cold as a girl, and no one had accused her of being proud, in the days when she first married. And now she was cold, reserved, proud, self-contained. The old, sweet, light-hearted girl whom Bruce Moncrieffe had married was gone, and in her stead there was a woman, nobler and stronger, perhaps, but not so winning, and bright, and altogether charming. You cannot touch pitch and not be defiled.

Constance Moncrieffe had come through her

ordeal well; she was a good wife, and a good mother; but, nevertheless, she was conscious of having brushed against the pitch. Are there not hundreds of cases like hers, of which the world guesses nothing? Do not silent tragedies pass beneath our eyes every day, though we, in our carelessness, see nothing of them? Unless people cry out that they are hurt, the world sees nothing of their wounds.

And, after all, as Constance told herself, shaking herself angrily out of her reverie, she was not an unhappy woman—at least not *now*. She had her children to love; and a good husband who loved her; and indeed she told herself that she owed Bruce a great deal of gratitude for the noble way he had behaved when Mrs Dean carried her story about his wife and cousin to him. Never, by word or sign, had he shown Constance that he was jealous, or mistrustful of her. And now any doubts that he might once have entertained were laid at rest completely and for ever. Poor old fellow! Constance murmured again. She really must go down to him at once.

Just then, Harry and Jack appeared from the direction of the garden, where they had been strolling for the last hour. Constance watched them attentively, and saw that Harry's manner was quieter and more subdued than usual. They approached Moncrieffe, and Harry

stooped and kissed his forehead, and the young man seated himself on the bench beside his host, while the girl ran indoors. For a minute Constance paused, and noted how her brother was digging his heel awkwardly into the ground, while he spoke, without looking her husband in the face. Then she turned to leave the room at last. As she reached the door, she encountered Harry, blushing and radiant.

"Oh, you darling!" cried the girl, putting her arm round her step-mother's neck, and embracing her warmly. "I am so happy; and I know it is all your doing. Jack never would have forgiven me but for you."

When Julia heard that her sister was engaged to the future Sir John de Vere, she became more than ever convinced that marrying at sixteen is a mistake.

THE END.

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